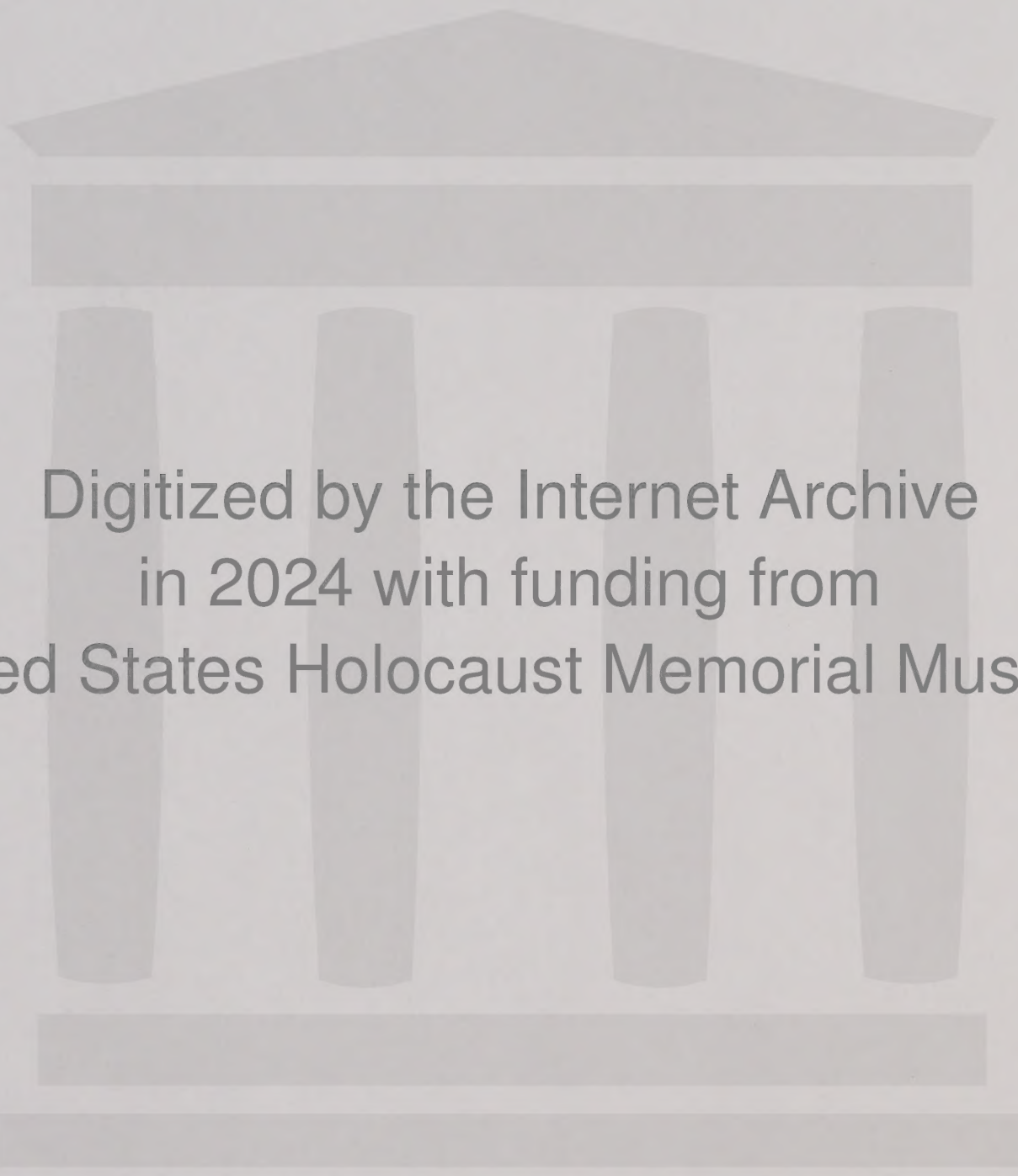




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AND THE FORESTS SHALL HIDE ME

The True Story of How a Jewish Teenager and the Criminal Who Saved Him
During WWII

by Larry Stillman

based on the testimony of Morris Goldner

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1. Rescue

I can remember crawling out from beneath our father's blanket.

It was with shocking surprise that I knew he was dead. I was not alone. I was surrounded by others who were also dead. I was surrounded by others who were also dead.

"Goldner was such a quiet, gentle young boy. A short little guy, soft-spoken and submissive. He never could have committed acts of sabotage and resistance. Just didn't have it in him."

—Home Army partisan from Goldner's home town

1. Rescue

I can remember crawling out from beneath my father's lifeless body.

It was with absolute certainty that I knew he was dead, of course, in those scattered moments when I was capable of any rational thought at all. His fate was evident in the heavy weight that pressed, unmoving, upon my own injured body; in the taste and smell of blood, like rusted metal, I thought, that etched its way into my nose and mouth and throat as I lay there, too frightened and too weak to move. He was dead, my papa, and very soon I would join him. How many other 16-year-olds, I wondered, knew what it was like to watch death approach?

It is hard to say how long I lay there under my father's motionless form. Hours, perhaps, drifting in and out of consciousness. In random fragments, the events of the past 24 hours came back to me, and I started a mental litany of "what ifs"—what if we hadn't gone to Piatek's house? What if we went to Regula, instead, or stole food from a stranger, as we had often done before? Then we would not have been turned in to the SS here at the Grabiny train station. Then perhaps Papa and I might have lived. For that is exactly how I was thinking: as if I were already dead.

But I discovered that my will to live was stronger than any acceptance of death, so when I noticed that the station was silent, I struggled to free myself from the prison of my father's corpse.

My first sensation was the slap of cold winds on my skin. I had forgotten it was already January. The year 1943 had tiptoed in slyly, nearly unnoticed, wearing a death's head just like the year it came to replace.

Ignoring the chill in the air, the pain in my hip, and a searing fire across my back, I crawled laboriously on my stomach away from the tracks, toward the

rear of the small station house. A few meters farther, the frozen ground sloped down for a short distance, then leveled out to where a row of red-caned berry bushes had been planted. Soaked in blood—both my father's and my own—I worked my way toward the bushes, collapsing beneath them. I was only partially hidden from the dirt road beyond, but found myself too weak to move any further.

I lay there trembling, a limp rag of a boy, struggling to remain alert. It would be easy to give up now, to slip once more into unconsciousness, to join Papa in death as Piatek had intended.

Look at yourself, I shouted in my thoughts. Look what you faced just moments ago, yet here you are, you are alive! And your papa—your poor suffering papa—has protected you, even in death, with his body. It is a sign—what else can it be?—that you are not meant to die here, not in this way. How dare you decide when your death should come?

Then I thought of Moishe Rycz, who for a time had been with me in the forests. How he had given up, welcomed death. Like him, I had nothing to live for anymore. Still and all ... I resolved anew that I would not make it easy for those German bastards and their conspirators. I would not give them the satisfaction. *Death will come soon enough, I told myself, and most certainly at the hands of the Nazis and their collaborators. But for now, if I have any choice in the matter, I will do whatever it takes to stay alive. For when I do take my last breath, at least I will know that I died as a direct result of my struggle to survive. I will...*

I thought I was dreaming when I heard a voice that was not mine.

"Don't be afraid, little one." From somewhere above, a whisper.

It had to be a dream, it seemed to me, for the words were in Polish, not German. Surprisingly, I found it soft and reassuring, like a Yiddish melody.

I tried to focus my eyes. I looked up to see the hazy vision of a stocky, powerfully built man. He was crouching over me. He glanced anxiously around as he removed his coat, then his shirt, seemingly oblivious to the winter cold.

I felt dizzy, still trying to focus on him. It was twilight, now, making everything more difficult to see. He looked to be in his late 30's, perhaps 40, it was hard to tell—the war made everyone seem old before their time. His face suggested sturdy Polish peasant stock, but the skin around his eyes, his neck, hung loosely. It was as if he had lost a great deal of weight, then recently put some back on. His sandy blond hair, thinning just a little in front, lay disheveled on his head. With his shirt off, I could see the muscles of the man's arms. They looked like two boulders beneath tight, goose-pimpled skin. Now all the man wore were his dusty trousers, tucked into the tops of his frayed leather boots, officer-style.

This apparition of flesh and blood knelt beside my trembling body and wrapped me in his large shirt. Then he draped his heavy coat over me, lifted me in his arms as if I weighed nothing, and carried me away from the station, away from the ashen, crumpled heap that was my father.

Again the man said, "You got nothing to fear from me. I seen what happened, I seen you crawl over to the bushes. Just do what I tell you, and I can help you. Do what I tell you, and we both might keep breathing a while longer."

Slowly we made our way through the fields, heading north toward Straszecin, the next village up the road. This was the village where I grew up, where the family I recently lost used to live.

"Who are you?" I remember asking in a weak voice. "Where are we going?"

The man growled, a low deep sound that had no hint of its earlier gentleness. "Don't ask so many questions. Some things, you're better off if you don't know."

Had I not passed out again while in his arms, I would have probably discovered the answer sooner rather than later, for I would have recognized the house we entered that evening. It was a three-family unit just four blocks from where my own house now stood empty. The door in back led to a residence everyone in the village knew, because its infamous owner, while seldom seen, had long been a topic of gossip. His exploits, which had begun many years before the war, were legendary.

His name was Jan Babik, but for all I knew at that moment, he could have been the Messiah.

In a way, he was, at least for me.

Upon entering his house, he carefully set me down on a cot. His wife Stefania, pregnant with what I would later learn was their eighth child, gestured wildly in protest.

"We have so many mouths of our own to feed, and you bring me another child?" She shook her head disdainfully from side to side, then added: "A dead one, from the looks of him."

As if to challenge her observation, I suddenly opened my eyes and looked up at her through gauzy veils. She was heavysset, notwithstanding her pregnancy, with a hard-looking face. Stood maybe a couple inches taller than me, no more. Wore her hair up, hidden behind a flower-patterned babushka. Something about the way she stared at me suggested that she recognized who I was, or at least knew me from the village.

"The boy got shot with his father. The father wasn't so lucky," Babik told his scowling wife.

"Maybe the father is the lucky one," she muttered.

My fevered mind tried to make sense of things. *Had this man seen the whole thing? Couldn't have, the shooting happened earlier. But maybe he was*

there the whole time. Maybe he thought I was dead until I crawled away. Maybe he ...

As I lay there, neither dead nor fully alive, Stefania studied my wounds. I was lucky, she said, for the bullet had apparently torn away some tissue, nothing more. There was also a laceration on my back—I could not remember how it got there—but she believed that, too, would heal in time. She would clean the wounds, give me some food and clothing, but that would be all. It was too dangerous, she announced, with the Germans coming by almost daily, searching for her husband.

I wondered why they were looking for him. I knew he certainly could not be Jewish. All the Jews had been taken away, hunted down like wild dogs. I wanted to cry out, *Do you know what it is like to run for your life day after day?*

“It will be weeks before he gets strong enough to hide with me in the forest,” Babik said, interrupting my thoughts of self pity and planting the seeds of new questions. “He needs care.”

“Why do you want to hide this boy with you?” she asked him. “You have seven—eight—children of your own, you barely see them, but you want another one with you. And a Jew, no less. I think he’s the son of that milk peddler, the woman who came by here each morning on her way to buy from the priest.

I let out a small gasp. So she *had* recognized me!

“The Germans are after him just like they’re after you,” Stefania added.

“We got something in common then, the two of us,” Babik snapped at her, saying no more.

Stefania sighed. “Well, he can’t stay here. You know how dangerous that would be.

“Yes.”

Suddenly, Stefania’s face brightened. “What about Walantina’s place?

They'll never look for him there!"

Walantina, I would discover, was a widow, a close friend of Stefania's. She lived just outside the village. Both women served as maids at the "palace," which is what everyone in Straszecin called the big estate on the hill.

"That's good, yes, that's real good." Stefania's husband was clearly pleased with the idea. Asking Walantina to hide me for a short time would be asking her to risk her own life, but as I know now, Babik never doubted that she would agree. She would do it for Stefania. More importantly, she would do it because no one ever dared to refuse *him*.

"Once he gets his strength, I'm sure he can do all right in the forests," Babik said, perhaps to appease his wife. "He made it this far, after all."

Stefania said nothing.

I grimaced in pain as Babik hefted me on his back and headed for the door.

"I just hope he's bright and has some balls," he called back to his wife. "The boy's got a lot to learn."

"And a lot to forget as well, I imagine," Stefania murmured, with no tone of sympathy.

But I suspect her husband never heard her response. He was, I am certain, already thinking about how he could use me, turning over the exciting new possibilities in his mind.

But I have not even told you my name.

Growing up, it was Moishe Goldner, Moishe being my Yiddish given name, used only within my family. To the Poles, I was Moniek, which you would pronounce as "Moe-neck." To be honest, I felt equally comfortable with either surname. Whatever they want to call me, it is still the same person they are calling, I figured. I did not distinguish between "Moishe" and "Moniek," any more

than I did between “Jew” and “Pole.” Could they not be one and the same?

I came into the world minutes before my twin sister Gita. We were born on February 12 in the year 1926. Or maybe it was 1925. Few birth records survived from that time and place, and I am no longer certain which is correct.

My parents, Leap and Regina Goldner, lived in the tiny village of Mokre at that time, but we moved to Straszecin in a neighboring district of southern Poland—the region called Galicia—when Gita and I were 5 or 6. Mokre was my mother’s home village, and her unmarried brother, Isaac Flam, continued to live there after we moved. He worked as a butcher, and regularly showed up at our home in Straszecin with a juicy cut of kosher beef or mutton. Those treats, along with Uncle Isaac’s cheerful, outgoing personality, won me over from the time I was a toddler.

“Moishe, look how big you’re getting!” Uncle Isaac would say every time he saw me. But by early in 1939, he had been saying it with far less conviction, it seemed to me. Perhaps he only said at all it in the hope his words would make it so. For after the age of 10 or 11, when other children—including my twin sister—enjoyed growth spurts and shot up like the wildflowers that dotted the countryside every spring, I simply stopped getting any taller. Here I was, 13 years old, yet I could not rise above five feet in height unless I stood on my tiptoes.

“Do you really think I’m bigger than the last time you saw me?” I asked one day, standing erect as if that would somehow will my body to instantly respond.

“Maybe so,” Uncle Isaac said thoughtfully, probably so as not to dash my hopes. “Yes, I think maybe a little.” And off I went, feeling taller, wondering if I would ever catch up in size to Gita. Even my parents did not know what to make of it. Papa was five-foot-eight, more or less, Mama five-foot-four.

As it was, the sight of me standing next to Gita drew amused glances whenever we were introduced as twins, because Gita was a tall, blossoming

teenager, already showing considerable emotional, as well as physical, maturity. Her dark hair fell to her shoulders in soft curls, and her coppery complexion clearly came from Mama. Our neighbor, a good-natured farmer named Wladyslaw Regula, did not believe for a moment that we could be twins. Most everyone in the village, in fact, assumed Gita to easily be two years older than me.

Aside from being considerably shorter, I looked no different, really, than many of the Polish Catholic boys of my age in the village. My face was rather average, it seemed to me—thick, dark eyebrows; a small nose that did not fit the prevailing Jewish stereotype; full lips; and ears that stuck out just a little, like dainty handles on a teapot, I sometimes thought. A small imperfection, really, or so I convinced myself.

Looking back, I was probably more introverted than many other youngsters in my village, sometimes prone to long periods of quiet reflection. Yet I was also quick to anger, and not easily intimidated. My arms were actually rather muscular, strengthened from the pails of water I carried from the river every day. My strength was a source of pride to me. I was determined that no one would ever take advantage of me because I was small.

I was also fiercely protective of my sister, and she knew that in spite of my size, I could be tough and dauntless. Once, when I overheard a bully at school taunt Gita with cries of “Christ killer,” I went after the boy and knocked him down. After I threw the first punch, the boy on the ground cried, “Stop! I take it back!” Reluctantly, I backed off, warning him that any further comments of that nature would be met with a far stronger response. Until he skulked away, I had not even noticed that the boy outweighed me by at least twenty pounds.

Looking back, it heartens me to think how Gita watched out for me in return. She was the one person I would tell things in confidence, without fear of betrayal. Still, she loved to tease me when she saw an opening.

Like the time, in our younger days, when our neighbor Regula had conned me into taking over his tiresome plowing for an afternoon.

“Moniek, I’ll bet you’re strong enough to guide that plow through the field. Would you like to try?”

“But *Pani* Regula,” I had said timidly, “I have no idea how to do it.”

“What is there to know? Just stand behind the plow, and let the horse do all the work. Think how much fun that will be!”

It did look like fun to me. I had often watched Regula’s muscles ripple as he walked behind his plow, straining to keep the furrows straight and true. Eagerly, I took advantage of the opportunity to prove my own strength. Regula, cackling to himself, watched for a moment to make sure I could handle the work, then went looking for a shady place to close his eyes.

Meanwhile, I held tightly on to the plow and worked Regula’s field under the merciless sun. When I came in at sundown, muscles aching and hands blistered, the smell of the earth still in my nostrils, Gita taunted me for being so easily manipulated.

“I see Regula’s got himself another horse,” she snickered.

I took the bait. “No, you must be mistaken. That horse is the same one he’s always had.”

“Well then, maybe it’s just one part of the horse I’m thinking of,” she chided. “I hear he calls it Moniek.”

My home village does not appear on many maps of pre-war Poland. To get there, you might set out from beautiful Krakow, in the country’s southwest, then head about 40 miles due east to Tarnow.

From Tarnow, if you continued a few miles east further still, toward Debica, you would locate the area precisely. Both Tarnow and Debica were thriving

communities, with a vigorous Jewish population. Tarnow's more than 25,000 Jews, I have been told, accounted for about 45% of its total population—the highest percentage of Jews anywhere in Galicia. Debica, a smaller community, added another several thousand more.

These two cities were connected to Krakow by both road and railroad, offering travelers along the way as lush a panorama as existed anywhere in Europe. The rolling countryside, though cold and bleak in winter, was inspiring the rest of the year. Here, patchwork quilts of fields were planted with all manner of grains and vegetables: high above the ground, wheat, rye, barley, and oats bent to the whims of the breezes; on the soil itself, countless cabbages sat in neat rows, forming wave after wave of white and green (and sometimes red) leafy shells tightly folded inward, each upon another just beneath; and below ground, there burrowed a profusion of root vegetables, including carrots, turnips, parsnips, beets and potatoes—always potatoes.

Punctuating the countless acres of fields were dense stands of forests. Pines and birch, sometimes yielding to linden or poplars, were plentiful in this part Poland, especially northeast of Krakow, where they followed northward along the Wistula, then wandered down through Mielec and south to Debica. Continuing even further south, the terrain became noticeably more rugged, the forested green hillsides thrusting higher to meet the foothills of the majestic Tatra Range of Poland's Carpathian Mountains.

In between Tarnow and Debica, though much closer to the latter, my childhood village of Straszecin sat nestled amid great forests. Here, the fertile fields were nurtured by the nearby Wisloka River which separated our village from Debica. Only two Jewish families lived in this small farming community—ours, and about a block to the south, the family of shopkeeper Moishe Rycz.

The shopkeeper would answer only to his Yiddish name. Unlike me, he refused to accept having “Moishe” changed to the Polish “Moniek.”

“I am a Jewish Pole,” he often said, “not the other way around. My name is ‘Moishe’ and my gentile neighbors can call me by my name, or not call me anything at all.” Then he added: “I call them by *their* given names, don’t I?”

Rycz was a gentle and generous man in his sixties, educated as a pharmacist. He lived with his wife and three nearly-grown daughters at the back of his little store. For many years, it had been the only store in town: a true general store, selling a wide range of goods—foodstuffs, some clothing, cooking utensils, kerosene, farm implements, paint, vodka and brandy, and of course, medicine.

But by 1937, I was old enough to understand that growing anti-Semitic factions within the Polish government argued to replace the nation’s predominantly Jewish shopkeepers with stores owned by gentiles. “Patronize your own” was the catchphrase of the day, if memory serves, and a law was passed requiring each store owner to post his name outside his shop. So it was not surprising when a second store opened a few blocks away from Rycz, owned by an ethnic Pole named Krakowski. Rycz, however, was far more generous in extending credit during those devastating economic times; his business remained reasonably strong, as far as I knew, if not terribly profitable.

About a block north of Rycz’s house and store—along the road that forked left toward Wola Wielka, where my paternal grandparents lived—stood our modest home. It consisted of one large room, nothing more, so no one had much privacy. Yet once I began going to school in Debica during the week, where I lived with my Aunt Enna, I actually looked forward to weekends in my own house. I had quickly found that living away from home did not hold the allure I once imagined. My schedule allowed little time for anything but school and study, and

I found it difficult to adjust to city living.

The outside of my family's home, like most houses in the area, was built of simple pine planks. The steep roof, with its step-like surface of straw thatch, pitched down below the top of the exterior walls to create an extensive overhang. A stone chimney vented the heat from the wood-burning oven inside. There was one door, and only one small window, for glass was hard to come by. A small shed on the side—it was not quite a barn—held feed and provided shelter for our animals: one small horse, several hens, and two, sometimes three, dairy cows. An outhouse stood to one side of the cow shed. On the other side, a cache was dug into the ground, a root cellar of sorts, where we stored vegetables for the winter.

Our modest living quarters had a floor of wooden planks, plain whitewashed walls, low ceiling beamed with sturdy larch. No electricity. No running water.

Furnishings consisted of a wooden table with a long bench on each side, and a simple cupboard for dishes. At one end of the room sat three beds, made of wooden planks set on short legs, each covered with a straw-filled mattress. The only color in the main room came from the stove which dominated the other end. Its ceramic tile exterior was a cheerful yellow, which I found almost as welcoming as the aroma wafting from the oven when Mama baked the Sabbath *challah* bread.

Beyond our home and few possessions, my father owned two small fields of less than five acres, known as “dwarf holdings.” In typical Polish fashion, they were not near each other. One adjoined our property in Straszecin. It was planted with potatoes and wheat. A second field, in Wola Wielka, had been given to Papa by his father. I had always assumed somebody was paid to tend these fields, but I was never really sure. All I knew was that with Mama peddling milk during the week, and Papa on the road buying and selling cattle, there was no

time left for farming.

How my grandfather and, ultimately, my father accumulated farm property, I never knew. True, many Jews tended to be merchants, craftsmen, business owners, and professionals. But Jewish farmers were really not all that unusual. I am quite sure my parents never thought of themselves as farmers, though, in the sense of growing crops. They were in the dairy and cattle business, and the fields they owned were incidental.

On the north side of our property, Regula lived with his wife and two children in an equally simple house a little further back from the main road. Regula's son, Stanislaw, was about the age of my sister and I; his daughter, Anna, was three years younger. I often played with Stanislaw, and frequently Anna tagged along. But after a time, Stanislaw and I would sneak off on our own to play cards for money. This ended one day just after I turned twelve. I gambled away all of my few *zlotys* in just a few minutes.

"Mr. Regula," I cried to my playmate's father after the card game, "tell Stanislaw to not to take my money anymore!"

Regula liked to recall that incident more often than I wanted to hear it. At the time he was an energetic man of 32, with deep-set eyes and a thick shock of black hair that looked windblown even on balmy days. His gently lined face, tough as new work boots, frequently melted into an engaging smile. His hands were especially rough, callused through years of hard labor. To him, working the fields was second nature, and the dirt that often wedged under his fingernails was what he called "toil soil": rich and abundant and good.

In the winter, when the fields lay fallow, Regula sometimes got employment at the flour mill in Debica, or the lumber yard practically adjoining the mill. Both were owned by the Grynszpan family, prominent Jews who were friends of my father. It was through Papa that Regula got part-time work at the mill, and he was

not shy about expressing his gratitude.

I never heard Regula harbor any ill feelings for the Jews, either. To the contrary, our neighbor was vocal in his beliefs that in general, the Jews were—I can recall his exact words—“a better nation than we Poles are. They are a good people, very solid and united and industrious, with a much higher culture.” I imagine his experiences with our village’s two Jewish families, ours and the Ryczs, helped shape his views.

As for my father, he was an industrious man, with a strong body and a darkly handsome face. His outgoing personality helped him to easily make friends, whose number included several gentiles. There was Regula, of course, and at least one other man I knew of: a longtime friend—or so he thought at the time—named Piatek, who lived just south of Straszecin in Grabiny. This man even came to my parents’ wedding, one of only a few gentiles in attendance. But Papa’s difficult life left him little time for *shmoozing*, and being a Jew in a mostly gentile village meant family was not only his main responsibility but also his primary social circle, if you could call us that.

Now and then on a Sunday, however, Papa would slip out of the house and stop by Rycz’s store while most everyone else in the village was at church. It felt good to speak Yiddish outside his own family, Papa said. There was a time, he told me, when the Jews who were welcomed into Poland spoke only Yiddish, the lush German dialect from the 14th century. But as I was growing up, we found it expedient to use our country’s national language outside our home.

If my parents experienced any overt anti-Jewish sentiment in these pre-war years, I never heard them speak of it. I had my own share of “Christ-killer” taunts when I was young, but unlike the times I felt compelled to defend my sister with my fists, I would usually fend off verbal attacks directed at me with words alone.

“I had no more to do with the killing of Christ than the man in the moon,”

was my usual response. In fact, it was not until I started school in Debica at the age of 12 that I truly felt alienated, this time by Jew and gentile alike.

My days of innocent, carefree—and, as I looked upon it then, unremarkable—childhood were drawing to a close.

2. *Babik*

Walantina's care and patience with me were working wonders, and after six days in her home my color had come back, along with an appetite she could barely appease on her small wages. Like most everyone else, she had trouble getting by on her own, and the man who saved me gave her only a few *zlotys* for my care. Soon the money would run out, then ready or not, I would apparently be joining the man—whose name I still did not know—in the forests.

My temporary custodian was, I must say, a kind-looking woman. She stood several inches taller than her friend Stefania and looked at least 15 years older. Her face was round and her chin turned out slightly, like a comma. She had a slim figure, and seemingly boundless energy. I imagine when she was younger, she was probably quite a stunning woman. Much like my sister Gita had started to become...

Walantina, I recall, reacted with amazement when I told her I was just weeks away from turning 17 years old.

"Goodness, child, I would have guessed you to be maybe 12 at most," she said. Then she added, "I suppose appearances can be deceiving. If Stefania hadn't told me, I wouldn't have thought you were a Jew, either."

I did not know how to take the remark. My discomfort must have been apparent.

“What I mean is, that’s good, because in these times you’re better off looking like a Pole.”

“I *am* a Pole,” I responded dryly. I was not going to make this easy for her. “I was born not far from here. That makes me Polish.”

Walantina seemed rather flustered that the conversation had taken this turn. She turned away and busied herself by wringing a cloth in a basin of water to rinse my wounds.

“Look, I have nothing against the Jews,” she said. “I shopped at Rycz’s store quite regularly, and he was kind enough to give me credit more than once. Even for a Jew, that was certainly a Christian thing to do.”

If I were not in such emotional and physical pain, I might have smiled at her remark. But I let it drop, and was grateful as Walantina redressed my injuries in silence.

Over the following days it must have been clear to Walantina that I was not willing or able to discuss the treachery that brought me here, and thankfully, she did not pry. She knew that my father had been killed and that I had been left for dead at the Grabiny station, and she surely must have sensed that I was replaying the scene over and over again in my mind. It is true that I was grieving deeply, yet outwardly I maintained a stoic, almost emotionless façade. It was as if my ability to feel had been stripped away.

One evening as I lay resting, my eyes open but not seeing, Walantina sat beside me and gently stroked my hair.

“You be tough, that’s all right,” she said—to me, to everyone, to no one at all. “That’s what it will take to help you get through this.” Then she got up and sighed, “To help us all get through this.”

“Walantina?” I propped myself up on one elbow, looking at my caretaker. She stopped, turned. “Yes, child?”

“The man who brought me here ... who is he?”

I had wanted to ask the question from the beginning, and no doubt she had been expecting it. Sitting back down in her chair by my bed, she took a deep breath and looked deeply into my eyes.

“Name’s Jan Babik. He’s also from here. From Straszecin.”

My jaw dropped as if I had just bitten into a hot coal. Walantina smiled at my reaction.

“You know who he is, then?”

“I’ve heard of him, of course. Ever since I can remember, people have talked about him.”

My mind churned with the bits of gossip and hushed conversations I had overheard years ago, before the war, from the time I was old enough to understand.

The most feared man in Eastern Galicia.

King of the bandits.

He’s crazy—he’d just as soon kill you as look at you.

A dangerous man. Controls the black market in this area...

He’s never been caught. Everyone’s too afraid to turn him in.

Could this really be the man who spoke so softly to me at the station, who carried me gently in his arms and on his back to safety? I found it hard to believe. My mind continued to race with some of the stories I had overheard while I was growing up. Stories of the man’s bank robberies and home invasions. Daring exploits so shocking, it seemed to me they could not possibly be true...

Shortly before the war began, Jan Babik spent the day of his thirty-second birthday doing what gave him more pleasure than most anything else: planning and carrying out an armed robbery.

Unlike others in Poland's criminal underworld, he didn't specialize in one particular way of doing things. He was proficient in all manner of theft, banditry, black marketing, and—as had often proved necessary—acts far worse. He liked to raid farms, homes, and churches. He was adept at stealing from small businesses like shops, granaries and breweries. He also preyed upon passers-by on the street—whoever might be ripe for the picking. His only bow to consistency and restraint was to refrain from plying his dubious line of work within 20 miles or so of Straszecin, where he lived (on those occasions when he wasn't in hiding) with his wife and, in those days, five young children.

In the twilight hours of late March, 1939, the air was bloated with humidity as he approached the flour mill in Sobow, a small village just outside the town of Tarnobrzeg—an easy half day's train ride north of his home village. He'd heard through his grapevine of fellow miscreants and black marketers that the owner of the mill, a reportedly surly fellow named Kopec, no longer kept his working capital in the Bank of Poland.

The man was not unique in this respect. In the past two years alone, there had been three runs on the national bank with rumors that the venerable institution—a victim of the long-standing depression—was about to go under. Yet, depression or not, everyone still needed bread.

Babik reasoned there had to be plenty of money at the mill, and he was determined to get his hands on it. As with all his jobs, he planned carefully and worked methodically. He did not know failure.

The mill loomed just ahead. The large water wheel was still, the ponderous millstones silent. Only the trickle of the Trzesniowka River which ran beside the mill interrupted the damp calmness of the night. Babik was dressed in dark clothes, but they wouldn't hide him completely even in the enveloping night. He was, after all, a big man—average in height but strong and stocky, *like a bull*,

he often thought—and not particularly light on his feet. No matter; he seldom relied on the element of surprise to achieve his goals. He let his weapons speak for him.

He knew there would be no one at the mill this time of evening except Kopec and his wife, who lived in the small cottage beside the long granary. Through a side window he could see the flickering light of a single lantern which dimly lit the room inside.

No need to be dramatic. Babik knocked on the door.

“Who’s there?” came a man’s voice from the other side of the door, which remained closed. Kopec was being cautious. Perhaps he’d been robbed before. Or maybe it was just times being what they were.

“Name’s Janeczko,” Babik lied, raising his voice so he could be heard. “I run a small bakery in Tarnobrzeg. Look, I know it’s late, but the mill I usually buy from told me they’re going out of business. Just like that, can you believe it? Leaving me with nothing to knead but my wife’s ass, and that won’t pay no bills.”

He paused, but the door remained closed.

“Which mill?” came the wary voice from behind the door.

“It’s to the south, halfway to Mielec.”

Babik chose a location some distance away. He hoped there wasn’t a close network among mill owners like there was among thieves. He preferred not to shoot his way in, because Kopec was of no use to him dead until he led him to the money.

Babik tried again. “Look, can’t your business use another customer? Or are things so bad you’re giving up, too?”

The door opened a crack, revealing the furrowed brow of the mill owner, his dark black hair combed back in an effort to hide a great bald spot that appeared to spread in all directions. A touch of foam glistened on his bushy

mustache in the light of the lantern he held, suggesting that he'd been drinking beer when interrupted by the knock on the door. His suspicious, narrow-set eyes looked past Babik for an instant, and when he saw there was no one else, he opened the door all the way.

"Come in," he said. "I was just being careful. There are gangs of ruffians in the area."

"So I hear," said Babik, as he revealed his semi-automatic to the surprised mill owner. "But you won't run into them tonight. They're all afraid of me."

It wasn't much of an exaggeration. Other criminals regarded Babik as crazy and dangerous. They kept their distance. Babik avoided them as well, except when taking advantage of their information pipeline. Normally, he preferred to work alone.

"Don't hurt me," Kopec begged. He stared at the weapon, then looked more closely at the intruder who brandished it.

What a frightening sight it must have been: the muscular and barrel-chested Babik, with sandy blond hair, several days' growth of beard, and piercing blue eyes as cold as the Polish winter. His mouth, downturned in a deep scowl, suggested that he'd be quick to anger. His attitude, self-assured and brazen, left little doubt that he'd never back off from his demands. Babik well knew how to intimidate.

"Just tell me what you want," Kopec pleaded, as he walked slowly backward away from the door, his eyes again focused on the gun.

Babik let out a sound that was somewhere between a growl and a snicker. "What the hell you think I want? Your money, you stupid piece of shit. But first—your wife. Where is she?"

"She's asleep. I myself was about to—"

"Take me to her," Babik snarled.

"You won't hurt her, will you?" asked the frightened mill owner as he led the intruder toward the bedroom at the back of the small cottage that adjoined the granary and mill.

"Depends on you. You're going to tie her to the bed so she don't do nothing foolish."

"Tie her? With what?" Kopec turned slowly, hands in the air, and looked at Babik.

"Don't worry, I always come prepared."

With his free hand, Babik reached behind his waistband and removed a coiled length of rope. He tossed it to the mill owner.

They entered the little bedroom, where a heavysset woman was asleep. Kopec shook her gently, glancing nervously at the weapon in Babik's hand. "Wake up. We have ... uninvited company."

She gave a shrill cry when she saw the gun pointed in her direction, but once Babik clearly explained the situation to her, she submitted to his rope. Her husband tied her as the bandit directed.

Satisfied that she was securely fastened, Babik warned, "If you scream or try to escape, both you and handsome, here, are dead. You understand?"

She stared at him, too frightened to speak.

"Do you understand?" he repeated again, this time loud, angry, insistent.

"Yes," she squeaked. Then she looked helplessly at her husband, who turned back to Babik, awaiting further instructions.

"The money. All of it. Now!" barked Babik. He gestured impatiently with his weapon.

"I don't have as much money as you might think," Kopec stammered, as he walked out of the cottage and unlocked a door to the granary. The lantern he carried flickered in the night breeze.

"Spare me the bullshit," Babik roared. "You keep all the mill's money in the Bank of Kopec, headquartered right here. Now you're going to make a full withdrawal. And if I think you're holding out—" He didn't finish the sentence.

The lantern provided the only source of light in the dark interior. Kopec led his captor up a flight of stairs, toward a messy office that overlooked the floor on which lay piles of grain waiting for the grinding stones. Babik could hear little scurrying noises as they climbed, coming from the floor below. Rats, he guessed. Better fed than most people he knew.

Entering the tiny office space, Kopec set his lantern down on an old desk that was strewn with purchase orders and other paperwork. He looked at Babik, and pointed to a corner a couple feet behind the desk.

"It's in there."

Babik looked and saw a heavy safe, quite new-looking. Probably purchased within the last year or two, when Kopec stopped trusting the bank. Babik thought, *I should be getting a commission from the goddamned Bank of Poland. Thanks to me, people might start using it again.*

"Open it," he said. "And remember, I don't need you no more. I can use explosives to open the safe myself, if I have to."

Several minutes later, the safe door swung open.

"Now take out the money and stack it on the desk," Babik demanded. "Then count it, out loud."

Kopec did as he was told. There were several stacks of notes, and when the final tally was complete, Kopec nervously cleared his throat and declared, "23,618 *zlotys*. Believe me, it's all the money that's here."

Babik scowled. He had hoped for close to 50,000. Still, not a bad haul. Holding the gun on Kopec, who cowered next to the empty safe, he scooped up the stacks of notes with his free hand and stuffed them into the large pockets of

his loose pants.

“Now,” said Babik, “hand me your watch.”

“What?”

“Your goddamned watch. Hand it to me.”

For the first time, Kopec began to protest. His tone changed from fear to annoyance.

“Look, you have every *zloty* I have on hand to run this whore of a mill. You can at least let me keep my watch. It was given to me by my—”

“You son of a bitch, you gonna tell *me* what to do? You know who I am?” Babik bellowed.

Livid with anger, he put his boot on the edge of the desk that stood between him and Kopec. With a powerful kick, he sent it flying backward where it slammed into the startled body of the mill owner, knocking him to the ground.

Without thinking, and out of pure frustration, Kopec lashed back, “Everyone knows who you are. Who else has the balls to take over a business, a home, to make demands without a gang to back him up? You’re that bandit Babik everyone’s afraid of, who else could you be? You got my money, now leave me and my wife alone.”

It was not the smartest thing Kopec could have said, for Babik gauged the ultimate fate of his victims by whether or not they could identify him. If he thought they could, he then considered whether they realized—and sufficiently feared—what he would do to them if they alerted the authorities. He had a sixth sense about these things. It was one reason he’d never been convicted of a single crime. That, and the fact he had eluded manhunts time and time again by relying on a number of hide-outs—some quite elaborate—throughout the south of Poland.

Weapon extended, Babik stood over the frightened, angry man who lay crumpled between the open safe and the desk which pressed against him.

"You got a big mouth, you know that?"

He fired directly into Kopec's brain. One shot only, for bullets were hard to come by. Then he coolly climbed down the stairs, exited the granary, and walked back into the cottage, into the bedroom at the back, where Kopec's wife stared at him tremulously as she lay bound to her bed.

"Where's my husband?"

"Your husband ... was a fool. And now he's dead."

A wail of anguish arose from her throat. Then: "Are you going to kill me, too?"

"I don't know," he answered truthfully. "Give me a reason why not."

Her mind raced. "Because I'm helpless here. Because you'll be long gone before they find me. Because you got what you came for."

Babik paused. Part of him wanted to kill her and be done with it, but he was a thief, not a cold-blooded killer of innocent women. Her smart-ass husband got what he deserved, but her ...

He walked over to the bed and put his face within inches of hers.

"Listen carefully and believe every goddamned word I say. If I find out you gave my name, or even my description to the authorities—and I will find out, I promise you—I'll come back and kill you. Trust me, I *will* get to you before anyone finds me. Do you understand?"

She swallowed hard and nodded, radiating fear.

Whether she knew it or not, it was not an idle threat. From this region of Poland all the way south to Podkarpacie, the police—like many of the townspeople and villagers themselves—were aware of Babik's activities. But eye-witnesses were either afraid to identify him, or they were dead.

He smiled as he left the granary, knowing he could get anything he wanted. Knowing his family would have food on the table in spite of the terrible

depression throughout the country. And knowing that, by the time the approaching day ended, he'd be strolling into his house in Straszecin with more than 20,000 *zlotys* in his pocket, delighting in the innocent, beaming faces of his ever-increasing brood as the older ones squealed, "Daddy's home! Daddy's home from work!"

There were many questions I wanted to ask Walantina, knowing I could not ask them directly of Babik, not until I gauged the man more closely, if even then.

"Is his reputation ... are the things I have heard true?"

Her face was solemn. "I don't know what you've heard, but I can imagine. Much of it is undoubtedly true. Some of it may be worse."

I swallowed hard. "Is his ... reputation ... the reason he's in hiding, too?"

Walantina seemed to choose her words carefully. "The Polish authorities knew about him, of course, long before the war. But he was far too clever for them." She paused a moment, then went on. "These days, though, it's the Germans who are searching everywhere to find him. Until a few months ago, he was their prisoner for nearly two years."

"Prisoner? Where?"

"A place west of here, west of Krakow, in Oscweicm. The Germans call it Auschwitz. He was caught in their net during a random round-up of Polish men. Forced labor, who knows what else. Can you imagine, Moniek? Men—most were not Jews, in those days—were disappearing right off the streets. Jan Babik was one of them. But he turned out to be one of the lucky ones."

"They finally let him go?"

She smiled at my naivete. "Let him go? Hardly. He got away."

Babik's reputation as a fearless renegade began to take on epic proportions in my impressionable mind. "You mean he escaped?" I asked rather stupidly.

“Yes, child, he escaped. What a story that is! He rode out from right under their noses.”

“The Jews think they’re the only ones who suffer,” complained Stefania Babik to her husband, certainly unaware that this was the last day she would see him for two terrible years.

It was back in 1940, and warm autumn sun seemed unusually hot for so late in the year. She was washing laundry in an old metal bucket, trying to engage her husband in some infrequent conversation before he vanished again for the day.

“What makes you say they think that?” he asked, more to prove that he had heard her than out of any real interest. Two of their daughters, Anna and Emilia, were clamoring for his attention, and he was anxious to go into Debica to look up a man who had expressed an interest in his services.

“I went to the store earlier, and I overheard that man Rycz talking to the other Jew who lives up the block from him—you know, the woman with the twins—and the two of them were whining about how the Krauts are singling out their people, doing terrible things. *Their* people! As if the good Polish Catholics of this country are living a life of freedom and luxury under the occupation!”

“They said that?”

“Well no, not about the Catholics, but to them, this war is only about the Jews. I swear, if Krakowski’s store were only a little closer...”

She stopped, for her husband was paying little attention to her. He was busily bouncing the girls on his knee, and they were squealing with laughter. He knew it never ceased to amaze his wife how gentle he could be with his children, considering the violence he was capable of doing to people and property. There seemed to be nothing he feared, not the police, and now, not even the Nazis. If

she had known, years ago, what kind of person he was ... would that change anything? he often wondered. Probably not. So what did that say about her?

“Speaking of the store”—Jan Babik reached into his pocket and removed a fistful of *zlotys*—“take this and give it to the Jew. He’s been good about credit, and who knows when you’ll be able to pay him again.”

He was like that: a good citizen in his own community. It made life easier for his family, and himself as well, when he was home. While everyone in Straszecin knew about his exploits elsewhere, in town he kept a low profile. He had never personally threatened any of his neighbors.

Stefania looked quizzically at the money, then at him.

“Take it, damn it, I risked my neck to get it” was all he said.

He knew she would not ask questions. In fact, she preferred not to know. And the children—they must never know, although how Stefania would keep their father’s actions a secret as they grew older, he had no idea.

The Babiks lived in an elongated, run-down wooden building that housed three families. It was a block south of Rycz’s store, just over the sturdy wooden bridge that crossed the creek where the villagers got their water. Because the creek ran behind the structure, the families had put up a fence alongside it to keep their small children from slipping in.

Of the three families that occupied the building, Babik was the only man who never put in an honest day’s work. Still, he stole far more than the other two families would ever begin to earn. It was a source of annoyance to them, he knew, but they would not dare to open their mouths. Indeed, he once overheard one neighbor say that he couldn’t decide whether he despised Babik, or envied him.

“When do you expect to be home?” Stefania asked as her husband headed out the door. She did not ask what his business was that day, for he would just be evasive, anyway.

"I'll be back by suppertime," he answered. "Certainly before dark. I'm only going as far as Debica."

She might have called after him, told him to be careful, but with the slam of the door he was already out of earshot.

Walking through Debica that afternoon, Jan Babik noticed the increased activity. There was a greater concentration of German soldiers than he'd ever before seen in one place. Still, he felt only a cursory wariness of the Nazi uniforms.

He walked down Krakowska Street, past the ransacked synagogue building, not far from where the Jewish ghetto was being established that very week. Not that it mattered to him; he looked out only for himself and his family. If anything, he felt the German occupation offered him a new beginning, wiping the slate clean of his many past crimes. The old authorities were no longer in authority, except to serve their new masters. And so far, at least, the Germans seemed more intent on harassing the Jews than policing the crimes of one Pole against another. Or so he assumed as he strode along a narrow side street off Krakowska, looking for the small apartment above an apothecary shop where he was expected.

The meeting took less than 15 minutes. The man who summoned Babik was a thin, swarthy young Pole who had been involved in the radical farmers' revolts of 1936. He had recently moved to Debica, was interested in acquiring weapons, and knew of Babik's reputation in providing that service. Babik was happy to oblige, but he informed his host that the price would be high. A short discussion arose. A deal was struck. Babik got up to leave.

"You understand that when I deliver the goods, you'll pay me in *zlotys*, worthless as they are," he said. "I imagine you have your own reasons to avoid the Gestapo. But listen good, because if for any reason you ever give up my

name to the Krauts or their lackeys, I'll come back and kill you."

The man didn't flinch. But he said, "Can I ask you one thing?"

"Depends."

"What people say about you ... well, let's put it this way, the word is you're a hell of a lot smarter than most others who do what you do. You must be, you're still around, while others are rotting in prison or in the ground. I'm just curious, nothing more, but ... how did you wind up, ah, in your line of work?"

Babik was silent for a moment, then: "The less you know about me, the better for both of us. See how smart I am?"

And he was gone.

As he began his walk back to the wide main street in Debica, his customer's question stayed in Babik's mind. Try as he might, he couldn't remember any conscious decision that had led him to a life of crime. He grew up in poverty, like everyone else he knew, stealing and shoplifting from the time he was a child. By age 13, in 1919, he'd had some schooling, but his aggressiveness got him in trouble most of the time. He hated school. He wanted only to join the Army. There was a nationwide conscription underway, and all the young boys leaving school were eager to sign up. But Jan was too young.

Early the following year, with a Russian invasion on the horizon, the Polish Army had been strengthened to twenty-one infantry divisions and seven cavalry brigades. Young Babik ached to see some action, to wear the new greenish khaki uniforms of what was considered to be an extremely tough and brave fighting force, despite the fact that they were ill-equipped for battle.

The Russian invasion was repelled, but by late 1920, Babik couldn't wait a moment longer. The Polish economy had been crippled, farms lay in ruin, and people were starving—Babik's family among them. At least in the Army, he'd get something to eat. So he lied about his age, and after several attempts, enlisted.

In the infantry, he was a fast learner, specializing in making and detonating mines and other explosives. He did everything in the Army except actually fight, and after four years—at the ripe old age of 18—he left, disillusioned and angry at the lack of action, unsure of what to do next.

Poland, meanwhile, continued to plunge in a downward economic spiral. Fully one-third of the labor force was unemployed. Babik found a day's work here and there, but it was back-breaking labor that barely paid a day's sustenance. More and more, he resorted to stealing, primarily working the rural areas where he felt most comfortable.

Late in 1929, an even worse depression hit, and agricultural prices dropped so drastically, everything that was grown was sold at a huge loss. Money virtually stopped circulating in the countryside. In the cold of winter, children had no coats; they wore cotton sacks filled with straw.

Under these dire conditions, Babik was forced to begin working the cities, where he stole from businesses, well-heeled individuals, and banks. He discovered a thriving business dealing in the black market, providing whatever he could steal to the highest bidder.

During this period he met and married Stefania, and they settled in Straszecin. Being good Catholics, they began having children almost immediately, and Babik was determined to provide for his growing family. As his crimes increased, so did his reputation. He began to find himself under the deepening scrutiny of the Polish authorities, but he thwarted them at every turn with his cunning.

In the spring of 1936, working class demonstrations were taking place in Krakow and Lwow. Many people were wounded and killed. The revolution soon spread to the villages, where the peasants took up arms and stopped food deliveries to the towns. During this time, Babik became involved with a radical

group of farmers from Strzyzow, southeast of Debica, who were intent on leading their own armed revolt. While they were strong on dogma, they were short on arms. Babik provided them with stolen guns and explosives.

Crime had become his calling, and he thrived on the excitement and danger. Above all else, he loved the sense of power he felt each time he outsmarted his victims and the police. It gave him peace of mind as well, knowing that while he was never one for earning money, he was masterful at stealing it. His was a reckless lifestyle, he knew, and a difficult one for his wife to understand. But he had few regrets. It was the only life he knew.

As he approached Debica's busy main street, he moved almost mechanically. He wasn't carrying anything incriminating, he was simply on his way back home, so he paid no attention to the fact that a block behind him, Krakowska Street had just been cordoned off by the SS. Similar barricades were being put in place two blocks ahead, and entrances to each cross street and alleyway were being similarly blocked by SS and Gestapo officers with fierce dogs.

By the time he realized what was happening, it was too late, even for the self-assured and powerful Jan Babik. The Germans were conducting one of their random and increasingly frequent street roundups, looking to catch political dissidents, intellectuals, criminals (which they broadly defined as anyone of anti-German sentiment), and ordinary, hardy males suitable for forced labor.

While Babik fit into several of these categories, he was quite certain that his anti-social calling had nothing to do with his arrest. He was, without a doubt, physically fit for the demanding work the Germans had in mind, and even though his papers were most certainly in order (a magnificent forgery which identified him by a pseudonym and listed his occupation as "farmer"), the man who had eluded criminal arrest and prosecution for so many years did not slip through this German net.

He was handcuffed, along with dozens of other men, very few of whom were Jewish. Jan Babik, the great intimidator, the man who prided himself on having never been captured, was taken in a crowded lorry to the prison in Tarnow, skirting his own village of Straszecin on the short, miserable journey.

Babik discovered that the crowded cell he found himself in had been empty for several weeks before his arrival. It seems 728 ethnic Poles had been transported from there to a place 75 miles to the west. They were the first arrivals at a largely unfinished detention center the Germans called Auschwitz.

This news came to him from one of his fellow prisoners, a former professor and a theologian. The man passed on bits and pieces he got out of a talkative prison guard.

"This place is paradise compared to that hell hole, from what I hear," said the professor. "You mark my words, we'll both end up there before long."

Babik scowled. The Germans had registered him by the pseudonym on his papers, so he was confident they didn't know who they had.

"I'm just a poor farmer," he raged, continuing the ruse. "What the hell do they want with me?"

"For one thing, you're obviously strong. And fit. Not wet behind the ears, but young enough to work all day without collapsing. Then there's your light-colored hair. You're a Pole like I am, but you almost look like one of *them*! You think you have to be an intellectual, or a Communist, or a politician to wind up under their boot heels? You're fooling yourself, my friend. You're *exactly* who they want."

"Then I'll be everything they want me to be and more," he said, more to himself than to the professor, a patronizing smart-ass for whom he felt nothing but disdain. "They won't break me."

“I hope your arrogance serves you well,” said the man of learning. He didn’t speak another word to the deluded peasant who thought he could outsmart the Nazis.

Three weeks later, Babik found himself at Auschwitz.

Auschwitz, the first German camp established on occupied territory, was originally designed to hold not Jews, but ethnic Poles. It sprang up west of Krakow, around what had been a group of Austrian artillery barracks during the first world war.

Upon arrival, Babik’s group had been driven into the cellar of the admissions building, accompanied by vicious blows and kicks. In a twist of irony that was not lost on Babik, he was immediately robbed of his few personal belongings. In rapid succession, he was shorn of his hair, disinfected, issued a striped uniform, registered under his pseudonym, and marked with a number which was sewn to his uniform.

From the time he arrived, he was housed in one of the grossly overcrowded, single-story, red brick barracks. There he slept on the floor like a sardine in a tin until bunk beds were installed some months later. The bunk beds didn’t alleviate the overcrowding; they merely rearranged it. Before long there were more than a thousand prisoners crammed into each barrack.

He was told to write a letter to his family, telling them of his temporary residence. Only fifteen lines were allowed, and one of them had to contain the words “I am in good health and feel well.”

His daily routine began with the wake-up jangle of a gong at 4 a.m. Following a few hurried moments for toilet, “washing,” and what they called breakfast, he lined up for roll call. This usually meant standing in place for hours. He was ordered to do his work in double time—pulling down houses of Polish residents who had been evacuated to make room for camp expansions. He

toiled from 6 a.m. to 5 p.m., with a half-hour lunch and bathroom break. Sometimes he had to line up on his knees for evening rations, consisting of two or three slices of heavy German bread smeared with a scrape of margarine, and a small amount of watery soup.

The early winter of 1940-41 was particularly tough on the inmates of Auschwitz. Babik's barracks had neither a stove nor windows, and there were no winter clothes, no coats or sweaters. Inmates often went barefoot, without any protection from the cold. The penetrating mists that rose from the nearby Wistula River seeped into the unfinished camp buildings and added to everyone's sickness and misery. Babik had a hacking cough and an almost constant chill, but he fared better that winter than did many others.

True to the promise he had made in Tarnow prison, Babik was a model prisoner, a hard worker who never complained. He acted almost eager to help with the ongoing construction that was transforming Auschwitz from a minor detention center to a major concentration camp. As a result, he was not personally beaten or bullied by most of the guards, but the brutality and inhumanity he saw most every day sickened even him.

One morning, as he was carrying a stack of two-by-fours to a new block being readied for additional living quarters, he passed a group of children. They were babies, not more than two or three years old. They were being corralled into a small area by SS men immune to their heart-wrenching screams.

What he saw made his stomach churn. The Germans lifted the shrieking babies by their feet, one after another, and plunged them headfirst into a deep trough of water until their wriggling bodies went limp. Babik wanted to swing the studs of lumber he was carrying, slam them into the heads of the officers. He might have done so, had not a guard come up behind him, bayonet extended, and shouted for him to keep moving.

Sweet Jesus, he thought, I'm no saint, but how can anyone torture and kill innocent babies?

That evening he gave his dinner rations to another prisoner.

Several days later, there was an escape at the camp, and all the inmates were ordered to stand at roll call in their bare feet from noon until 10 at night. Anyone who fell was shot. As for the escapees, they would probably be recaptured, Babik knew, for most usually were. If they weren't shot immediately when found, they'd be brought back to the camp and paraded in front of the prisoners still standing in line. Then they'd be shot or hanged right there in the *appelplatz*.

Babik stood at attention for the entire 10 hours, willing himself to stay on his feet. Throughout the ordeal, he thought of his family. He thought of what he would do to those Kraut bastards, every one of them, should he ever have the chance. And he thought about the daring prisoners who, at least for the moment, had escaped from this hell on earth.

It gave him hope.

Walantina told me what little she knew about Babik's arrest, confinement, and ultimate escape, and I listened with fascination. For those brief moments, her story helped me take my mind off the pain.

"I'll tell you what Stefania told me—that's his wife, if you remember—and what she told me, I imagine, is only part of the story. I can't swear every word is true, either, because who knows if Jan told her exactly how things happened. He's tight-lipped about his own business, that one. I suppose he has to be, considering the nature of his business."

I nodded. The muscle in my hip still felt like it was on fire, and I winced as I moved my leg, trying to find a more comfortable position. Walantina looked

down at me with concern.

“Go on,” I said. “I’m listening.”

Walantina told me how Babik was picked up in the street roundup, sent to Tarnow, then on to Auschwitz.

“He was arrested not because of his robberies or anything—at least I don’t think so—but simply because he was in the wrong place at the wrong time. They called it an arrest. But it was nothing more than a kidnapping. Like I said before, it was for forced labor.”

She paused for a moment, as if weighing her next words, then she continued, “So you see, it’s not just the Jews being persecuted. No Pole is safe, either”—that distinction, again—“and we’re all suffering, just like your people.”

I let it pass. Most everyone was suffering in one way or another, that much was true. There was no end to the suffering.

Walantina looked away, seemingly lost in another world, as she continued her story

“As you might imagine, Moniek, Stefania was sure her children would never see their father again. Turns out, it was a miracle he survived inside that hell hole for as long as he did. For as he told his wife, the conditions, the brutality of the place was beyond anything a human being could imagine in his worst nightmare—and remember, this is Jan Babik we’re talking about, who’s dealt in plenty of rough stuff in his own world. And beginning early last year, when the Jews were brought in, they had it even worse, from what he told his wife. They—”

She stopped suddenly, aware, I suppose, that these details would only torment me. So she said instead, “How could that not effect a man, even a man like Jan Babik; how could it not make him ... somehow ... more human?”

I had no answer. For my own part, what I had seen and what I had been through had, if anything, made me feel less than human. I had no humanity left,

I feared. What is the expression? An empty shell.

In the days before Auschwitz become a full-fledged death factory, the life expectancy for Polish laborers was about three months. Disease was rampant, sadistic punishment and torture were meted out daily, and the work was crippling. Defying all odds, Jan Babik had been there for almost two years before he learned that he was about to die.

He'd lost a great deal of weight by this time, but his strength remained almost as undiminished as his determination to survive. For close to a year, he'd been part of the work detail building a new satellite camp in nearby Brzezinka, to be called Auschwitz II-Birkenau. At the time, it was designed to hold Russian POW's.

Babik owed his long-term survival to his own determination and shrewdness, to the adept use of his particular skills, and to a great deal of luck. Every prisoner's fate was subject to the whims of his SS guards, and Babik had cleverly nurtured a relationship, if you could call it that, with a couple of them. They weren't as brutal as most of the others, and made it clear they were open to bribes. There wasn't much on hand to offer them, but Babik was still the consummate thief. There were valuables and a little money that had been smuggled in by some of the prisoners, but his real delight came when he was able to steal from the Germans themselves. *Robbing Hans to pay Fritz*, he liked to say.

In return, these SS guards looked out for him. They enabled him to get a few hundred extra calories many days at mealtime. They made sure he always had a clean, disinfected uniform (for their own protection, more than his). And they saw to it that he was assigned to work details that bore fewer fatalities from overwork.

Beginning in the summer of 1942, he was assigned a real plum, as camp

jobs went: carrying construction materials to the new camp. Not on his back, but on a sturdy four-wheeled wagon, pulled by two horses. Other prisoners helped him load and unload the wagon, but Babik was the principal driver, often teamed up with a lugubrious fellow named Turek, who only knew Babik by his assumed name.

Each day they passed through several sentry points between the stables in Auschwitz I and the construction area outside Brzezinka. After a time, SS guards only sporadically accompanied them within the camp. Still, at the outer border, a German officer would always jump into the back of the wagon.

On this particular autumn morning, Babik had arrived at the stable, hitched the horses to his assigned wagon, and jumped up on the driver's bench. Turek climbed up next to him, and together they set out for the railroad siding, where they were to pick up a load of bricks to be used for the new crematorium—or so they suspected—being built at Auschwitz II. Along the way, they found it hard to ignore the prisoners, men and women alike, who were being beaten for not moving fast enough.

Babik never ceased to be surprised at his continued sensitivity to the suffering around him. Ever since that day he saw the children being drowned...

"What did you hear from the block clerk?" Turek asked, when they were out of earshot of SS guards. Babik had worked on the clerk for a long time, and was finally getting some information out of him.

"It's not good. He says part of our detail is being transferred to the Political Section in a few days. Including us."

"The Political Section?" It must have filled Turek with fear, for others who'd been transferred to that section were never heard from again. "We're farmers, for Christ's sake, why would they transfer us there?"

"You think they need a goddamn reason?" Babik growled. "I'll give you a

reason—we been alive too long. Even my two SS ‘buddies’—they can rot in hell with all the rest—even they can’t help us no more.”

“If we’re transferred, we’ll be shot or gassed,” Turek wailed. “Or worked to death within days. It’s all over for us.”

“Obviously, you don’t know me. I don’t plan to die here. Never did.”

Turek’s face registered amazement at his friend’s audacity. “Two years in this hellhole, and you talk like you can control your own destiny,” he said to his co-worker. “Only fools think they can beat what’s inevitable.”

“Only fools accept as inevitable what can be changed,” Babik replied. “Tomorrow, I’m going prove it. Unless you’re even dumber than you look, you’ll come with me.”

“Do you have a plan?” asked Turek.

They were coming up to the railway siding, where pallets of bricks were waiting under the watchful eyes of the SS. Babik spoke in a voice barely louder than a whisper.

“I always have a plan,” he said confidently.

Walantina looked at me with concern. “Is this perhaps too much all at one time for you?”

I shook my head. I needed to know everything I could about the man who would soon come to get me. “How did the man ... did Babik ... escape?” I asked.

Walantina shifted in her chair, which she had pushed up tight against my bedside, and primly folded her hands in her lap.

“Jan Babik always was a clever man. Toward the end, he somehow fell into a job that involved driving a horse cart—he told Stefania it was far better to be a horse in that place than a person—and somehow he learned that something bad was going to happen. That’s when he planned his escape. Or maybe he already

had the plans in place, knowing that one. Do you really want to hear how he did it?"

"Yes," I said, thinking it might shed some light on how and why Babik came to rescue me.

"Well, keep in mind I don't have every detail, but here's what I've been told: he somehow found a way to steal an SS uniform from the guards' living quarters. He and a man named Turek met at the stables, as they did every morning. The SS uniform was divided between them, concealed under their prison uniforms. First they set out to the railway siding where they filled their wagon with bricks. But this time, instead of loading the bricks in a solid block, they left a hollow space in the center which could be reached from the front of the pile."

"Weren't there guards with them all the time?" I asked.

"Not within the main camp, as I understand it. Remember, all the block wardens inside the main perimeter knew Babik, or whatever he called himself there. For months, you understand, Babik and Turek had been taking building materials outside the main camp, to where a second camp was being expanded. Only when they got to the checking post at the border of the big sentry chain was an SS guard assigned to accompany them.

"Anyway, as you may have guessed, between the railway siding and the sentry chain, Turek climbed into the cart behind the driver's seat, crawled into the hollow area of the bricks, and put on the SS uniform. Then when Babik gave the all-clear, Turek got out and sat in the back of the wagon, waiting until they reached the border checking post."

I am sure I looked puzzled. "And the Germans weren't at all suspicious?"

"Don't forget, Babik drove that wagon every day. Plus, there already was an SS guard with him. It was Turek, of course, but he had the uniform, he even

had the correct pass that allowed them to leave the grounds.”

“Where did he get the pass?” I asked.

“Could be Babik stole it, but most likely he forged it. A versatile fellow, our Jan Babik, yes? Anyway, Turek flashed the pass at the outer checking point, and it was in order. The only thing that aroused the curiosity of one border guard was Babik being alone on the driver’s seat. He asked where the second prisoner was, and Turek as the SS guard answered in perfect German, ‘dropped dead this morning.’ It was a believable answer, and they were waved right out of the camp.”

At that moment I started to cough, causing more pain to shoot through my back and hip. Walantina offered me some water, which I took gratefully. Then with a wave of my hand, I indicated he was ready to hear the rest of the story.

“Once out of sight of the sentry chain, they drove the horses as deep into the woods as they could. Then they continued on foot. Here everything gets vague, but apparently Babik and the Turek fellow had some help from local villagers who gave them civilian clothes to change into.

“Of course, by that evening, a full-scale search had been launched, but obviously the two men weren’t recaptured. I’m sure that’s another good story. Who knows exactly how Babik made it back home? Anyway, since he used an assumed name, it’s possible the Germans haven’t looked for him here, I don’t know. He stays to the forests, that much is true, but then, he spent plenty of time hiding before the war, too.”

Her voice stopped. Her eyes looked away, lost in some corner of the room. Then she said brightly, “And shortly after he came back, he found you at the Grabiny station, and here you are.”

Whatever the exact details of Babik’s escape, his evasion was one of the few that succeeded. In the five-year existence of Auschwitz, there were no more than

600 poor souls who managed to break out of the camp. I read this somewhere. Of this number, at least 400 were re-captured and put to death, often after long, painful torture.

As Walantina finished relating the story, I closed my eyes and felt on the verge of sleep. Carefully, quietly, she got up.

“You get your rest,” I heard her say just before I drifted off. “Life on the run with Jan Babik will not be an easy existence.” Then I heard her mumble a short prayer for me, and I remember thinking, *don’t waste your words. No one is listening. Prayers are empty words.*

And shortly after that, I slept.

3. Into the forest

Toward the end of my second week with Walantina, I could tell my wounds were healing. Physically, at least, I felt greatly improved. My hip still hurt when I tried to stand, but it was a lot better.

Walantina reluctantly told Stefania Babik that I had recovered enough to leave, and Stefania passed that information on to her husband when she brought him food at a predetermined place in the forest.

Walantina had made me some warm underwear to help protect me from the winter chill, and she mended the brown checked jacket I had on the day my father and I were shot. The lining had been torn, she noticed, and there was a tear in the back where the bayonet had entered. There was not much she could do about the blood stains, except lighten them a little.

The pants and flannel shirt I now wore had been provided by Stefania—at her husband’s insistence, I imagine; my old blood-soaked rags were thrown away.

Walantina told me she wished she could do something about my shoes, which were practically falling apart at the seams, but of course she could not risk taking a pair of boy's shoes into the cobbler in Debica. After all, she had no children of her own, and too many of her neighbors were playing up to the Germans, thinking it would save their own necks. Come to think of it, perhaps there was no longer a shoemaker in town anyway, for wasn't he a Jew?

After dark, Babik came to the house and tapped on the window pane. As I watched from another room, Walantina hesitantly opened the door. She held a package of cooked potatoes and beets that would hold us over for a day or so.

Babik was warmly dressed in multiple layers of clothing and he was well armed. A grenade bulged near his waist, and he had slung a submachine gun over his shoulder. As Walantina took this all in, he got right to the point.

"Is the kid ready?"

"His name is Moniek," I heard her say. "Moniek Goldner. And yes, he's ready. I'll go get him." She started to turn away, then stopped and spun around.

"He has been through so much, in such a short time," she began.

Babik scowled. "Haven't we all."

"I took him in because your wife—because you—asked, and now I ask something of you. Take good care of him. Keep him safe."

Her eyes were getting misty. Could she have experienced some sort of attachment for me, a Jewish boy she had known for only two weeks?

Babik's tense mouth turned into a half smile, only for the briefest moment. Then he regarded Walantina with a strong gaze. "I'll teach him good, and I'll look out for him. But even though he's built like a boy, he's got to do a man's work, and face the same dangers I face."

"I know that," she said, diverting her eyes and looking down at the ground.

Babik went on. "Let me tell you something about the forests around here.

They're getting crowded as the cities. You can't walk in a straight line without bumping into an armed band, or Jews on the run, or German patrols, or the Blue Police, or other crazy bastards—which, some would say, include me.

"I got my own reasons to hide. But I also got a wife to support and seven—soon eight—mouths to feed, and by Christ, war or no war, I'll find a way to do that like always. And if the kid does what I tell him and shows some spine, he stands the same chance as me to escape German bullets. Which may not be the world's best odds, but they're a hell of a lot better than my leaving him to bleed to death under his father's body."

Walantina nodded. Then she and Babik looked up as I came into the room.

"I'm ready to go," I said to Babik. "I'm ready for whatever lies ahead."

"You better be. Here, I'll carry you on my back. It's a long walk and you need to save your strength."

As I climbed up on the man's strong back, I looked over at Walantina. For an empty shell, I discovered that perhaps I had some small feeling of appreciation after all.

"Thank you, Walantina," I said. "For everything you did for me."

"I'll pray for you both," Walantina said, handing the package of food to Babik. Then she watched as the master criminal and I headed out into the cold, starless night, leaving behind the comfort of the fire which licked eagerly at the hearth, and the brief but nurturing care of a tough old woman with tears in her eyes.

Our first day together was spent in an underground storage area, or *copiec*, in a field just outside Grabiny. It was dug into the earth to hold potatoes—up to a thousand pounds—and keep them from freezing over the winter months.

The covering was simply straw and earth, with ventilation that came from a slender wooden flue. There were several such dugouts in the field; for some reason, this one was empty. Possibly the potatoes it would have normally contained had already been conscripted by the Germans. Babik had discovered the empty space a month earlier, and had been using it regularly for shelter.

"Are you comfortable?" he asked me when we had settled into the cramped quarters.

"Perhaps if I were a potato..." I shot back, surprised at my own sarcasm.

Babik ignored the remark.

I leaned back, breathing in the damp, musty air. The smell of earth was a welcome respite from the smell of death. Or were they one and the same? As I moved, a small pile of dirt tumbled to the ground behind me.

"Actually, this is something of a luxury," I said, realizing that at least the chill wind was no longer penetrating my bones. "I have spent days in places a lot worse." I tried to push those memories out of my mind, but they were always there, lurking just below the surface, waiting to come forward.

Babik grunted. "You will experience such places again, I promise you that."

After a moment's silence, he abruptly asked, "You know who I am?"

I nodded.

"You heard stories about me? Things I done?"

"Yes ... some."

"You believe them?"

"I don't know. Maybe. Yes."

"And you're not afraid of me?"

I was tempted to say, *yes, I do fear you, probably always would, knowing what you are capable of*. But instead, I mumbled, "You rescued me. You kept me safe. You ... saved my life."

“Fear is good, never forget that, kid. Fear can be used to your advantage. They—” Babik’s hand swept in an outward arc, indicating everyone and no one—“they’re all afraid of me. Even the Krauts, only maybe they don’t know it yet. They’ll learn to fear you, too—what you can do to hurt them.”

I did not know what to say. Suddenly a chill sliced through my body.

“It’s also good to fear your enemy in return,” Babik continued. “Not no cowering kind of fear, a respectful fear, you know what I’m saying? It makes you careful, helps keep you alive. And you got to know who your enemy *is*—not just the Krauts, but also the goddamned informers. They fear the Russians more, but let me tell you, they’re full of shit. The Communists may be no better in the long run, who knows? But I can’t believe they’ll be worse. Besides, who the hell else is going to liberate us?”

I nodded to indicate that I understood, although I really did not. I had no political opinions of my own, just hatred, growing and festering, for those who had taken everything from me.

I looked up at Babik and asked, “When you found me in Grabiny ... what did you see? How long were you there? How did you happen to be at the station in the first place?”

“Don’t think about that,” Babik growled. “You’re here now, that’s all you need to know.” I thought he was done, but then he went on, “No, you also need to know this: as long as you’re with me, you will do what I say, go where I tell you, fart only when I say you can fart. You got much to learn, and that will take time. School starts tonight, after dark, so shut your mouth and get some sleep.”

School. I never thought I would miss it, dream about it, long to have those days back again!

Before the war, my school day in Debica began at 8 a.m. Each morning I

went to a regular Polish school a short distance from the apartment where I stayed. It was the home of Aunt Enna, my mother's sister.

School, in general, was hard for me, or more likely I did not apply myself enough. Regular classes finished at two in the afternoon, giving me a one-hour break before I walked over to the synagogue, where I attended *cheder*—Hebrew school—until five-thirty, Sabbath eve excepted. Soon I would be called for my Bar Mitzvah. That, at least, was the plan.

The synagogue itself, built in the eighteenth century, was a handsome building on Krakowska Street. Its sturdy sloped metal roof rose gracefully to a plateau where it reflected the brilliance of the sun. Conversely, the elegant stained glass of the tall, arched windows below drew in the light, intensified it, gave it color and meaning. Over the windows, on the outside, wrought iron bars were positioned to form Stars of David, repeated in grids one after another.

Within the sanctuary itself, though, I felt ill at ease. The city boys were mainly Chassidic, their long *payes*—side locks—just one visible expression of their faith. I had been raised to observe the Jewish holidays, including the Sabbath as a day of rest; I kept kosher, and I was, after all, studying for my Bar Mitzvah—but I did not wear *payes* like most of the other boys, did not dress in the traditional black caftan and felt hat, did not practice my religion with anything near their fervor.

“Are you a goy?” they often taunted me. “You dress like a goy!”

“I don't have to look different to be Jewish,” I would reply, which left me open for the retort, “But you do look different. Different from us, and we're Jewish.”

There would never be a meeting of the minds, it seemed, between us so-called assimilated Jews and the Chassids.

By the time Friday afternoon came around, I could not wait to get back

home. Straszecin was a two-hour walk from the center of Debica, and that was when I took short cuts, trespassing through various fields. Whenever possible, I would try to hitch a ride on a horse-drawn wagon heading in that direction. This also left me with more energy to handle the one chore that waited for me when I arrived—filling buckets with water from the stream that ran under the wooden bridge just south of Rycz's store.

Friday evenings—*Shabbat*—were always special to me, because it meant that for the next 48 hours, our family would be together. Come Monday mornings, Papa would leave the house before dawn and head on foot (or hitch a ride) for the *targowica*—cattle market—in Debica. There he would spend a few hours examining the cattle that were brought in, and buy as many head as he could afford. He tried to sell as much livestock as possible right to the butchers and slaughterhouses in town.

Papa would take the remaining cattle down to the rail yard—the main east-west line went right through Debica—and load them, amidst much snorting and bellowing, onto cattle cars. Then he followed in a comfortable passenger train. Most of the time, he headed west, to Tarnow, where he would sell all he could. If necessary, he would continue on to Krakow. This usually kept him away from home most of the week.

But every Friday, Papa would be on the train headed toward Straszecin, getting off at Grabiny, the nearest station. An hour or so later he would come up the walk to our house, tired and sore, the dust of well-traveled roads on his pants, and heavy leather bags over his shoulders.

Inside the bags were his week's earnings, but most of this money would disappear the following Monday, when he would start the cycle over again. My father was not a wealthy man by any stretch of the imagination, but from time to time he tried to put aside a few *zlotys* in savings. He had opened a Swiss account

some time earlier, with a little help from his father in Wola. Neither Papa nor my reasonably well-to-do grandfather trusted the Bank of Poland, what with all the runs on the bank. Surely, Papa often remarked, his small savings would be in good hands, protected for him and his heirs in Zurich.

After washing up, my father usually changed into a clean shirt and a fresh pair of pants—his *Shabbat* uniform, Mama always teased, because he wore the same shirt every Friday evening. He would join us, then, as we prepared to welcome the Sabbath.

Earlier on Friday afternoons, my sister Gita usually helped Mama knead the eggy dough which they would braid and place in the stove. From there it would tantalize us for nearly an hour with the comforting, earthy aroma of intermingling wheat and yeast. Finally, the *challah* breads would emerge, plump and golden, as they helped the Sabbath candles transform our simple wooden table into a festive holiday setting.

As often as possible in those days before the war, Mama cooked a chicken for the Sabbath meal. Now and then, she even put a few eggs on the table, but only if Papa had a good month. In those days it was an extravagance to eat what you could otherwise sell. As the old saying went, “you don’t eat a chicken unless either you or the chicken is sick.” Much of the time, we settled for vegetable soups and dairy at the *Shabbat* dinner, similar to most other meals. Meat was seldom on the table because it was costly, and because we had no way to preserve it, except in the cold of winter.

Once in a while, Papa arrived home with a chunk of beef, given to him by one of the butchers he sold to. And sometimes Uncle Isaac came down for the weekend with morsels from his own butcher shop. On these occasions, Mama would add the meat to the evening’s soup, or stir small bits into the *kasha* of buckwheat groats, and I would savor every mouthful, chewing slowly and

carefully. It was almost as if some inner voice were telling me to make the most of every bite, for soon such moments would be nothing more than faint and painful memories.

I awoke toward nightfall, drenched in sweat. Nightmares, again. Not fantasies. Real. For a moment I did not know where I was. Then I saw potatoes, and Babik, and he was shaking me.

“You started to cry out,” he said sternly. “That can be fatal to both of us. Deal with your goddamn dreams, understand?”

Easier said than done, I thought. But I knew he was right.

For the next several hours, while we waited for total darkness, I tried to make conversation. Babik did not respond. The only exception to his sullen muteness came when I asked about his family. Babik’s eighth child had been born while I was recuperating at Walantina’s, a boy they named Wieslaw. Babik opened up just enough to say that he envied men who could be home with their wives and children.

“For my children’s sake, sometimes I wish I been in another line of work,” he admitted. “It might be better for them, some day, if I was ... someone different. But I didn’t think about those things before, and now ... well, now it’s too late.” Then with a twinkle, he added, “Besides, I’m the best at what I do.”

I didn’t know how to respond, so wisely, I think, I kept quiet.

“What I do, I do now for my family. It takes money to feed eight children, and as long as I breathe, they’ll have food on the table. Anyway, the war offers surprising new opportunities for a man of my abilities.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“I mean there’s ways to get money, just like there’s ways to get food and clothing. You can be a big help to me in doing that, a little runt like you.”

"Tell me what to do."

"Oh, I'll tell you," answered Babik. "And I'll keep you safer than if you was on your own. But staying alive will still depend on you, on how well you do what I show you. You also got to keep your nose out of anyone else's business who may be doing things with us."

"Others will be involved?"

"I have a business arrangement with ... a group of people you don't need to know nothing about. I'm going to keep you apart from all of them. It's better that way, you understand, kid?"

I nodded, although once again I was not sure I understood at all.

"Good. Now, shut up and rest until it gets darker. I don't like staying this close to Straszecin, they could be looking for me here. We're going to be far away by daybreak."

It was a pattern of survival I had already adapted to, this constant moving from one location to another. In the past, though, I had stayed pretty much in the same general area. Now Jan Babik would watch out for me, and I imagined we were like two nocturnal creatures—owls, maybe—flapping about to find a place where we might be free from harm for one more day, and then another...

"Along the way," Babik was saying, "we'll find some food, maybe some clothes, money, who knows?"

"You make it sound easy," I remarked.

Babik snickered and grinned—in spite of himself, I imagine. "Hell yes," he said. "In this war it's always easy. Long as I don't run out of bullets."

War did not reveal itself to me through the sounds of the German *Luftwaffe* overhead or the incendiary horror of homes and buildings in flame. On that first day of September in 1939, other areas of Poland were introduced to the new reign

of terror in such a devastating manner, but I first heard of the invasion through an urgent clamor that swept through my public school in Debica, hours after the German forces had crossed the border and Hitler addressed the *Reichstag* with a declaration of war.

For me, the news had little immediate impact. The skies above my head were clear, and would stay that way for some time. The closest the war would come to me, in those very early days, would be 48 hours later, when a lone German plane released a few bombs over nearby Tarnow, damaging the main post office and a hospital. At the time, I was not even aware of that.

I ran home from school that day—it was a Friday afternoon, I remember—acknowledging only that there might be a few new hardships ahead. My parents had already discussed the likelihood of war, but I could not imagine my life being much different than it was, no matter how Mama and Papa tried to prepare me for the inevitable changes that even they could not fathom.

The moment I entered the house, my sister greeted me with, “Moniek, have you heard the news?” She chirped the line with such excitement, I thought maybe she was about to announce a windfall of some sort rather than word of the Germans sweeping across the border.

Before I could draw a breath to assure her the news was all over Debica, she continued, “We heard it over the radio. The Germans have crossed into Poland with tanks and dive bombers and...and...” Then she choked back sobs, and I realized that what I took for enthusiasm was really a jumble of fear and confusion. Gita, for one, sensed that our lives were about to be immeasurably altered.

In the next moment, Mama sprang from the stove, where she had begun to prepare the Sabbath meal, and put an arm around my sister, while extending her other arm toward me. She held us tightly.

“Let’s not talk of war now, not on *Shabbat*. Somehow, we’ll all get through this,” she said, no doubt trying to convince herself as well. “Come, give me a hand. Soon your father will be home.”

But Papa did not make it home before sundown, when the candles were lit and the meal had begun. Nor did he make it home anytime that evening, or the next day. Frantic with worry, Mama reassured Gita and me that Papa was fine, that the Germans were nowhere in the area, that transportation had merely become disrupted with the news of war so Papa was having difficulties getting home.

Actually, she had hit upon the truth, because we soon learned that the rails and roads in our area were at a standstill, for a time, while the country absorbed the news of invasion and bravely, but with complete futility, tried to resist.

And when Papa dragged his body in the door on Sunday morning, having walked nearly half the distance from Krakow, we all hugged him greedily.

Mama knew he would not be home for long, but Gita and I were stunned beyond words when, two days later, Papa appeared at breakfast and announced that he was leaving, possibly for a very long time.

“You’re *leaving* us?” Gita was incredulous.

“How will Mama manage?” I asked.

Mama spoke softly, reassuringly. “Your father and I have discussed this for some time. He has to go now, before the soldiers come this far east. There may be no other opportunity.”

Papa looked at us and sighed. “To earn my living, I have to travel from town to town. You know that. Do you think that will be possible once the Germans take over? Think about it: what will I do? Become a *gonif* like that Babik who lives just over the bridge? I’ve heard there’s work across the Russian border. I have to find out.”

I recalled the shreds of conversation between my parents during the past year. My father had a brother and two sisters who had emigrated to America in 1915, long before my twin and I were born. They had written frequently, begging Papa to join them, to bring us with him, but he had always resisted. His life in Poland was not so bad, he said, and more importantly, his own parents steadfastly refused to leave. He insisted that his place was to be near them. Now he was leaving after all, leaving out of desperation, looking to salvage something, anything, to ultimately help his family.

Papa leaned forward, gave Gita a tender kiss on her forehead. Then he hugged me, saying, "*Moishele*, take care of your mother and sister."

I saw tears in Mama's eyes. She was an attractively slim woman, my mother, two years younger than my father and not often given to such displays of emotion. After hugging Papa one final time, she pulled away and patted down her dress in a prim and proper gesture, perhaps to help regain her composure.

A moment later, Papa walked out the door, his leather bag bulging as it lay slung over his shoulder. He was headed on foot for the eastern border, emigrating, it turned out, with hundreds of other Jewish men from our area around Tarnow and Debica.

Of the many men from this region who fled east in those early days of the occupation, a great number remained on Russian soil until the war's end. Most of these men, I would come to learn, survived. But other poor souls returned to Poland disconsolate and disillusioned, where they were to face an entirely different destiny.

The Friday after my father left, as I walked home from Debica for the weekend, I witnessed the first German soldiers—they were *Wehrmacht* forces—to arrive in our area. They appeared to be hardy and spirited young men, even courteous,

often smiling and waving to us. Accompanying these forces was a dusty convoy of trucks pulling tanks and artillery along the nearly-deserted roadway.

I watched with a sense of curiosity rather than fear, for the troops showed no interest in harassing us. They were on the move, settling into the cities of Tarnow and Debica, while others headed further east, pursuing the fleeing Polish Army in the direction of Rzeszow, which we learned was being heavily bombed that very day.

For the next month, I was able to maintain my well-established routine. I continued to spend weekdays in public and Hebrew school in Debica while living with my aunt, hitchhiking or walking home each Friday afternoon. However, I missed his father terribly, and fervently prayed for his safe and early return.

By the third Friday in October, the weather had turned unseasonably mild, and while I might have considered walking all the way to Straszecin, I came upon a ride almost immediately. It was a wagon filled with gravel, headed for a nearby cement plant just a mile from home. The driver—a plump pudding of a man who wore a muffler around his neck in spite of the warm weather—did not invite me onto the seat next to him, but indicated with a wave of his hand that I was welcome to jump onto the back of the cart. I was small, after all; the horse in front would scarcely feel my added weight over the load it was already pulling.

As the wagon plodded along, I faced the back, my legs dangling aimlessly off the edge. I kicked at the air, satisfied with my good fortune. I burrowed my rear end deeper into the gravel, making a small hollow in the stones in an attempt to get comfortable. I knew my dark-colored pants and jacket would be filthy from the dust of the rock, but decided I would rather wash them in the stream when I got home than pass up such a convenient ride.

After several minutes, I began to pick up small pieces of the crushed rock beneath me and pitch them, one by one, off the back of the wagon. Without any

conscious thought, I aimed at targets along the road.

Ping! A chunk of gravel hit a rusted piece of metal, the remnant of a discarded plow, lying in the dust.

Ping! The next stone found its mark as it glanced off an old wooden post.

Soon I began to daydream, and my thoughts became filled with questions and uncertainties, running through my mind in desultory fragments, as if I were spinning the tuning knob on a radio set.

I briefly wondered if my approaching Bar Mitzvah would ever take place—I was 13 years old, and many boys I knew in Debica had already undergone the solemn ceremony that welcomed a young Jewish boy into manhood.

Ping!

I questioned what the future might hold for me, now that I was becoming aware of tension all around, yet not fully comprehending it. I had no interest in farming, of that I was certain. Perhaps I would learn a trade, or sell cattle like my father. I hoped the German occupation would be nothing more than a temporary inconvenience.

Ping!

My thoughts turned briefly to my father, now undoubtedly settled somewhere in Russia, trying to eke out a living. At home, meanwhile, Mama was shouldering the day-to-day responsibility for her family. What would become of us if she could no longer freely come and go, peddling milk?

Mama. Every weekday morning before sunrise, she rose by four-thirty, filling her large white porcelain pails with milk to sell to customers in Debica. This she had been doing since Gita and I were born, and long before. It was a hard life, but not once had I ever heard her complain.

Ping! Ping! Ping!

I was not so much aiming at targets at this moment, as just throwing gravel

involuntarily, with more thought to my short-wave band of daydreams than to the movement of my right arm.

A bigger chunk of rock, now: not a ping! this time, but the sound of glass cracking. Of brakes squealing and tires skidding. It startled me out of my dream world, and I gasped at what I had done.

The very moment my arm had released the chunk of gravel, a black car had been passing by the horse and wagon, heading in the opposite direction, toward Debica. My small rock had found the car's windshield, pitting it near the driver's side and sending a series of fine cracks in all directions from the epicenter.

The car screeched to a stop. Its two passengers ran toward the wagon, screaming "Alt! Alt!" to the puzzled driver. I was stunned as they headed for me. I sat frozen on the back of the wagon. Their tall, leather boots and spotless green uniforms came closer. On their uniforms was an unmistakable skull and dagger insignia. SS.

The Germans grabbed me roughly, pulling me off the cart. One man, as I recall, did all the talking.

"My partner thinks we should just shoot you here," he began, "but you'll come with us." Between the German I learned in school and the Yiddish we spoke at home, the meaning of the Nazi's rapid-fire words was quite clear.

"First brush off the dust from your stinking clothes. You'll soil our car enough just by sitting in it. Hurry up, we're going to show you what happens to Polish swine who throw stones."

A good sign, I thought. He had said "Polish," not "Jewish." Still, I nearly wet myself.

Frightened out of my mind, I was taken to an old building in Debica just blocks from where my journey had begun a short time earlier. I was put in an

almost empty room and given an uncomfortable straight-backed chair to sit in. The room smelled of sweat, of fear. *Who had been here before me?* I wondered. Two guards were stationed outside the door. I remained alone, terrified, and in tears for what seemed like hours but was probably not more than twenty minutes.

Then in walked two Gestapo men, their uniforms black as death. They each carried a chair that they set down directly in front of me. They sat backwards, their hands resting on the top edge of their chair backs, and they glared at me as if I were some kind of insect. One of the men looked to be about 30 years old with a long jaw and sunken cheekbones; the other was a bit older, much bigger, with a misshapen, pockmarked face that made him look all the more menacing.

My interrogation went on for more than two hours. Why did you attack the SS car? they asked, speaking in Polish. Sobbing hysterically, I told them the truth, that it was an accident, I did not even see the car. What are your feelings toward Germany? came the next question. I have no idea, I answered, for indeed I did not. What were you doing in the wagon, where were you going, why were you throwing rocks?

It went on this way well into the evening, when to my surprise, in walked Mama. She had been summoned by the Gestapo, interrogated separately, then finally allowed to take me home. I guess the Germans had stomached enough of us country peasants.

"If you're brought in here again," the big officer with the face like a fresh-dug potato said to me—this time in German, "the next time, you won't leave. You'll get an early look at what will happen to all you swine in time. Do you understand me?"

I did not catch every word, but nodded my head anyway. It seemed like the right thing to do.

And then, in a strange twist of irony, Mama and I were returned back home

as if we were visiting dignitaries, in a finely polished SS car, which made the trip to Straszecin in just under 15 minutes.

It was just before midnight when we walked in the door. Outside, the sound of the German car speeding off gave way to blessed silence.

"What a nightmare," Mama said to Gita, who had been waiting anxiously at home.

My sister was greatly relieved to see me, but I think she hoped there would be more information forthcoming about the trouble I had gotten into. At the moment, however, neither Mama nor I were in any mood to elaborate. Gita knew that in time, I would tell her everything that happened. I always did.

"It's not safe to go into town any more," Regina told me. "You're staying here from now on. You will not leave Straszecin." Then, looking at Gita: "None of us will."

"But Mama, what about my Bar Mitavah?" I pleaded. Of course, I knew the answer. Deep inside, I had known for weeks.

"There will be no Bar Mitzvah. Not for you, not for anyone, I should think. Certainly not while the Germans occupy this country. Don't you see, *Moishele*, it's not safe to be a Jew anymore. It may not even be safe to be a *goy* much longer, at least here in Poland."

She could not have known the measure of truth to her own words. Within days, the synagogues in Tarnow would be set on fire and destroyed by the Germans. As if that were not enough, a large out-of-control group of local Poles would join in the melee by pillaging Jewish houses.

Debica's synagogue was to remain standing, however, although its interior would be ransacked. Eventually, the Germans would use it as a warehouse. For now, on the outside, they removed strategic strips of metalwork that covered the

windows so as to no longer form Stars of David. And soon thereafter, the prophetic words “die, Jews” appeared along with swastikas that were painted by an unsteady hand on the wall of the building.

It was finally getting through to me that while the war lasted, my life could no longer be the same. Although I had not been happy going back and forth to school in Debica, now I felt like a prisoner in my own home. Yet I had no idea how much better my life was, compared to what most families faced in the large cities.

Straszecin, a small village with an inconsequential Jewish population, was largely ignored by the Germans. But in the neighboring towns of Tarnow and Debica, strict sanctions were being handed down in increasing numbers. Jews in the city were required to wear armbands with an identifying Star of David. Jewish businesses were placed under the management of Ukrainians or residents with German lineage, who kept the keys and handled all the money. Jewish males between 15 and 45 were required to work 14-hour days for their German masters. The list of hardships went on.

These measures were not enforced in my village at this time mainly because there were no German soldiers present to enforce them. As long as Mama, Gita and I stayed close to home, we felt fairly safe.

It meant Mama could not continue peddling her canisters of milk in Debica. With winter nearly upon us and still no word from Papa, we struggled to get by. We would have no need for all our animals any longer, so Mama sold our horse and one of our two cows to the priest's farm adjoining the Straszecin church. (It was quite common, in those days, for country churches to have agricultural as well as spiritual interests).

“We'll still have milk and sour cream,” she told us, “and eggs, God willing.” Between our small field, and the ample field owned by our neighbor Regula—he

was always willing to share—there would surely be wheat and potatoes, at least. My grandparents in Wola offered to help us out as needed, and so did Uncle Isaac. His butcher shop was still in business, because Mokre—as small a community as Straszecin—was also being left alone by the Germans.

Then there was the shopkeeper Rycz, a kind and generous man. He often gave us food and supplies on credit, and not just because we were fellow Jews—he extended credit at one time or another to everyone in need.

“You’ll pay me back when Leap comes home, when Poland is again its own country,” he told Mama, but I suspected that neither he nor my mother believed that would happen any time soon.

And so the year 1939 ended, with its bitter changes, and a new year began. Gita continued to attend the school down the street. But me, I busied myself helping my mother with basic chores, and making repairs around the house. For some reason, I have always been mechanically inclined.

Living in a farming village also meant there was usually something to eat, at least then. That first winter of the war, food prices increased greatly, redistributing what little economy there was from the cities to the countryside. For farmers, this meant getting top prices for crops, in *zlotys*, or better still, through barter. Because much of the harvest went to feed the growing German Army, farmers were indispensable to the occupation forces. As a result, we were treated far better than most Poles in the cities.

Still, it saddened us to hear about additional hardships thrust upon the Jews in other cities, including the proliferation of Jewish ghettos in places like Lodz, Czestochowa, Lublin, Siedlce.

The Jews in nearby Tarnow and Debica had been able, so far, to live in their own dwellings, although they were subject to frequent house searches. But we heard about other forms of degradation forced upon them: *Jews are not*

permitted to walk slowly, read one decree. Jews are not permitted on Baluta Street at any time, insisted another. Jews cannot buy vegetables before 11 a.m. Jews must be off the streets after 7 p.m.

I may not have fully realized it then, but Mama most certainly did: the unimaginable was quickly becoming reality. Oppression was not the worst that could happen.

We walked many hours, Babik and I, following the winding Wisloka River to the north, until we reached a small village on the western edge of a vast wooded area known as the Blizna forest. Babik sniffed the cold night air, as if that might tell him something. Then he declared the village satisfactory for our purposes.

Part of the way, he had carried me on his back, although he pushed me to walk as much as possible. As we went, Babik was silent, for all that needed to be said had been covered just before we left our *copiec*.

The bandit had revealed what he would expect of me later in the evening. I tried not to act surprised, but armed robbery was not something I had ever had experienced before. On the other hand, I reasoned, after the months I had spent on my own raiding farmers' fields, not to mention breaking into Krakowski's store ... well, who was I to make moral judgments?

Whatever it takes, I had to remind myself. Whatever it takes.

Babik also tried to familiarize me with the two weapons he was carrying. One was a *Steilhandgranat*—a German-made stick grenade distinguished by a metal cylinder at the end of a long wooden handle. The other was a Russian submachine gun that never left his side. It was a Tokarev PPSH41, crude but effective, with a distinctive drum-shaped magazine that looked like a large metallic wheel extending below the gun just behind the barrel. Babik let me hold the gun and get used to its feel. It was surprisingly compact and light, but in my

small hands it felt immense. I wanted to ask how he came to possess these weapons, one from each side of the war, but feeling intimidated, I kept my tongue.

We entered the village after midnight and Babik appeared to select houses at random. He had a sense about these things, I would come to learn, honed through years of experience. The plan was to find a window that could be forced open just wide enough for me to slip through. Before the war, people seldom bolted their front door, but times had changed. There were bandits about.

Once I entered through the window, my instructions were to quickly open the door so Babik could enter. At the first house, I must have moved too slowly, for I opened the door to face a scowling master who angrily whispered, "Faster next time, damn it."

Our hope was to get in and out without waking anyone, and at the first house this evening we were successful. After a moment's hesitation, I began taking what little food I could find—just a few paltry vegetables, no bread or meat—while Babik searched for clothing and valuables. He found little of use except for a few *zlotys* hidden under the frayed cushion of a heavy chair. Before leaving, Babik did a quick re-check of the kitchen that I had already searched. He grabbed something from an otherwise empty cupboard. This puzzled me, but there was no time for questions as we fled outside.

"Next time, don't overlook something this important," Babik said when we were away from the house. He held up a liter-sized bottle of home-made brandy, nearly half full.

A few blocks away, in the second house we entered, the door made a loud noise as I opened it from the inside. A woman called "Who's there?" from the sleeping quarters in back.

Gun extended at his waist, Babik bounded into the room and ordered its

occupants—the woman, her husband and a young child—to huddle together in a corner of the room. The couple obeyed, trembling with fright, and the child began to cry. Babik handed the weapon over to me.

“Watch them while I search the house,” he said to me. “If they give you any trouble, kill them.”

The woman gave a soft wail, and protectively sheltered her hysterical child. Her husband looked on, helplessly.

I hoped my nervousness was not showing. I knew I could never bring myself to use the gun on these innocent people, and Babik must have figured that as well; I am certain he was listening carefully for any signs of resistance. There were none, as it turned out. There seldom were.

Most families knew the procedure well, you see, having been robbed repeatedly as banditry became almost routine. This annoyed Babik.

“I might have to get honest work when the war’s over,” he told me, “and leave this life to all the goddamn amateurs coming in.”

By the time we broke into the third house, I relaxed a bit, for I began to realize that the gun I held functioned perfectly well as merely a threat. I even rationalized that these people all had roofs over their heads, and beds to sleep on, and in most cases, a change of clothes. All of which was more than I had, more than most Jews had, and these Polish families were simply sharing their good fortune with me—albeit at the encouragement of a formidable semi-automatic submachine gun.

Deep down, however, I was not really comfortable with this justification. What’s more, I was appalled at the thought that Babik would use his weapon on innocent people without a second thought. But I knew I had better quickly adapt to his way of life if I wanted to survive, so I tried to push these moral quandaries out of my mind.

After the third robbery, we reluctantly left the comfort of the warm homes we had invaded. We fled back into the forest. There we paused a moment, sharing some of the food (Bread! Bacon and sausage—*traif!*) we had stolen from the second home. Babik took a long pull on the brandy bottle, then passed it over to me. With a wave of my hand, I tried to decline.

“Go ahead, kid, drink some,” Babik insisted. “This will keep you warm. It will also keep you healthy.”

So I took a small sip, felt the fiery liquid slide down my throat, then took a more generous swallow. I coughed. My face reddened. And for the first time since I joined him, Babik grinned broadly.

A half hour later, Babik said in a quiet voice, “I hope you can walk a little farther.”

I nodded. My hip still hurt, but the brandy had helped a little. I could not expect the man to carry me on his back all night. Soon it would be daylight, and I knew that with the Pustkow concentration camp just several miles to the south, this was no place to wander about after dawn.

“Where are we going to spend the day? Do you have a hiding place in mind?” I asked.

“I been hiding since before you were born,” he sneered. “I know the forests from here west to Rzeszow, and south to the mountains. Everywhere, I have places no one can find me. If you keep doing what you’re told, and if we live long enough, you might see them all.”

I digested this latest information, this new scrap of knowledge which I was being fed in only the smallest bits and pieces from the very private man who walked beside me. Finally I got brave enough to ask, “Why do you pick houses to rob that are so far from Straszecin?”

“Why do you ask so goddamn many questions?” Babik growled, and I was

afraid I had pushed too far. What might happen, I wondered, if the outlaw became truly angry with me?

"All right, I'll tell you why: you don't shit where you sleep," was Babik's pithy reply. It was obviously an axiom the man had followed carefully throughout his illustrious career. "I never robbed nobody within a two-hour walk of Straszecin, and that's the truth."

"Not even in Debica?"

"Especially not there. For one thing, it makes life a lot easier for my family. People in Straszecin can talk about me all they want—and I know they do—and I suppose they're even afraid of me. But show me anyone there who's ever been personally threatened by me."

It seemed to me that Babik wore that fact as a point of pride.

"Another thing," Babik went on, peering ahead in the darkness, "it's better to work where people don't know my face. Makes things easier, yes? But it's all right that they heard all the stories about me."

Another point of pride, I decided. Still, it made sense. From what I had heard many times, Babik had never been prosecuted before the war because the eyewitnesses to his crimes—those who recognized him, anyway—were afraid to come forward. According to the local gossip, the man was dangerous and well-connected in the underworld.

Babik stopped suddenly, shot me a piercing glare. "Anything else you need to know?" he asked menacingly.

"No," I squeaked in a tiny voice.

"Good."

We continued walking in silence for a few moments, Babik deep in thought. Then he said, "You handled yourself all right back there. But next time, you may have to *use* a gun, or a grenade, or something else that goes boom."

I tried not to show any reaction. *You will adapt*, I reminded myself. *You have no choice.*

“So starting today, after we sleep for a few hours,” Babik went on, “you’re going to spend every goddamn moment you got learning about weapons and explosives. And when you know everything *I* can teach you, I’ll introduce you to the Gypsy.”

Looking back to the spring and summer of 1940—usually the seasons I most enjoyed—I felt nothing but boredom and depression. There still had been no word from my father, and I feared we might never see him again. The only bright spots were the days Gita and I spent with our grandparents.

We loved to spend time with them, for the elderly couple doted on us, exuding a warm affection that my own parents held in check much of the time. Before the war, we spent at least two Saturdays a month, weather permitting, at my grandparents’ home in Wola Wielka. Because we traveled on the Sabbath, we could not go by horse cart. But the walk was a pleasant one, taking less than an hour.

My grandparents’ home was much larger than ours, and it sat on a generous parcel of land. The house was surrounded by a narrow stream that reminded me of the moats around European castles that I had read about in school. The construction was much like that of my own home, but there were expensive touches. Decorative hardwood beams were used throughout the house, and it had an ornate front door, inlaid with planks of hardwood arranged in herringbone fashion. In the diamond-shaped center of this door was carved a grand rosette. And on the door frame they had affixed a beautiful *mezuzah* of hand-painted ceramic.

Inside, there was one very large main room, with whitewashed walls and

simple furniture, along with an alcove that led to a separate bedroom. Gita, more than I, envied the privacy it afforded. In the past, she and I had often stayed over a Saturday night, which gave us our grandparents' undivided attention until we walked home Sunday afternoon. But we had not done this since Papa left for Russia. We would not leave our mother alone even for one night.

On one of our last visits, Gita and I became especially fascinated with the photos our grandparents kept of their other three children, two aunts and an uncle who had moved to America before we were born.

"This is your father's sister Anna," Grandmama said as she held out a yellowing photo of a pleasant-looking girl who looked to be about twenty. I could not help but notice that my grandmother's hand had become taught and gnarled from years of arthritis.

"And this is Sophie," she added, taking another photo from a lined wooden box. Now her hands were shaking a little. "Both of your aunts live in New York. And this—" she took out a third wrinkled photograph, showing a man who looked like a younger version of my father—"this is your Uncle Louis. It's an old picture, but he's four years older than Leap. He lives in a place called Chicago, in the west of America, I believe."

"You must miss them, *Bubbie*," I remember saying.

Gita added, "They're so far away."

"I miss them every day of my life. I wish you could have known them. Maybe you will someday. Maybe you'll go to America after the war. Now it's impossible." She sighed deeply. "From the time they settled there, they've asked us and your parents to apply for visas in practically every letter."

"Why didn't you go when you had the chance?" I asked.

She wiped away a tear. "Because we were stubborn. Because we were comfortable here and didn't want to start all over again. Because we never

thought things would get so bad in our own country. We were wrong, that's obvious now. It was a selfish thing to do."

"What do you mean?" asked Gita.

"Because of us, your father refused to leave, to take you to what we've come to understand is a better place, especially for Jews. Now he's in Russia, doing who knows what, struggling to make a living, and you're here without a father at home, and—"

She broke down, crying, and Gita did the same. Only I remained stoic. *Things couldn't possibly stay this bad in Poland, could they?* I wondered at the time.

Just then Grandpapa came into the room, followed by Mama.

"What's with all the tears?" he asked. "Is this how we're to spend our precious time together? Why can't we reflect on all the good things in our lives. Maybe over a cold bowl of *barszcz*?"

It broke the tension as together, we walked into the kitchen. While Grandmama and Mama put food on the table, there was no conversation. Then, even though it was not the Sabbath, we bowed our heads and thanked God for all the blessings He had bestowed.

In the autumn of that last year we were a family, German troops began passing through Straszecin more often and in greater number. We had to wear our armbands whenever we ventured out of the house.

The first snow had fallen in early October. By November, the temperatures had already plummeted to zero. I went out almost daily to gather firewood for our stove. It was also my job to carry water in buckets from the stream under the bridge, two blocks away. In this weather, the stream was frozen, at least on the surface, so I would often have to cut a hole in the ice with a heavy tool to get at

the frigid water beneath.

Mama heard some disturbing news at Rycz's store one day, no more than a rumor, she assured us: a forced labor camp had sprung up on the bank of the Wisloka opposite our village, just a few miles to the northeast. It was in an area called Pustkow. Some Jews from Krakow had initially *volunteered* to work there, she was told, for they were promised a decent wage and other privileges during what they believed would be merely a three-month tour of duty.

Little did we know that this would soon be just one of 900 German camps, that it would specifically be the camp where the Germans would try out their first portable gas chambers and crematoriums, where over the next four years more than 16,000 people would die. At the time, Mama passed on to us only a small number of the horrible things she heard, hiding her concern as best she could. As a result, the conversations at home often became forced, in an effort on all our parts to sound somewhat hopeful.

We were in the midst of just such a discussion, over watery bowls of turnip soup, while the snow outside swirled in oblique angles driven by the fierce wind.

Suddenly the door swung open and there, half-frozen and covered with snow, looking as if he might collapse at any moment, stood the gaunt, exhausted figure of my father.

"Papa!" Gita and I cried in unison.

With a gasp, Mama ran to him, her chair overturning as she jumped up. She threw her arms around him tightly, then pulled back.

"You must dry off by the stove, Leap." She pulled off his threadbare coat, wet with melting snow. Then she helped him off with his boots, which were practically falling apart on their own.

He limped over to the stove and leaned against it, shuddering. For a moment, I thought he might try to climb in, as if that was the only way he could

get warm. Papa was silent, rubbing his hands together, trying to ward off the aching wet chill so he could embrace the family he had not seen in well over a year.

“You have some warm soup, and then we’ll talk,” Mama said to him.

But my father had little to say, at least not in front of Gita and me. I never did learn what Papa did or where he went during these fifteen months he was away, or why, even more inexplicably, he decided to return.

“Things across the border are no better than they are here,” was the only explanation I ever heard from him. “There’s crime and poverty and a shortage of jobs, just like at home. And don’t even get me started on the Ukrainians.”

He looked at Gita and me with a love in his eyes that I will never forget. He sighed deeply and added, “Anyway, my place is here, with my family. Whatever happens will happen, and we’ll face it together.”

Then he gathered us in his arms—my tall, blossoming twin sister in one and me in the other—and said, “Now, let me look at you.”

Over the weeks to follow, my excitement over Papa’s return would give way to more boredom and frustration. Throughout March and April, our family only left Straszecin three times, walking to nearby Wola to visit my grandparents. Even Uncle Isaac’s visits to us stopped. We Goldners simply existed, living with uncertainty day after day, until we were awakened by a pounding on the door that came with the dawn one cool spring morning in the terrible year of 1941.

It became clear to me almost from the beginning of my time with Babik that he owed his survival to at least two very strong instincts: an innate ability to know when and where to move in and around the forests to evade discovery, and a strong intuitive sense of who could be trusted.

In those first weeks I was with him, we covered many miles and changed

locations according to Babik's impulses and instincts. During daylight hours we hid, often underground, in root cellars and storage tunnels, or in bunkers that had been dug out and cleverly concealed some time earlier. I often wondered how the man remembered them all.

Winter was almost behind us, but on extremely cold days, we still broke into barns and cow sheds. Babik had been right: it was easy to take what we needed, and so far, at least, nobody had tried to resist.

When we were not asleep or robbing houses, Babik insisted on a rigorous schedule of training on weapons use. He drilled me on the intricacies of several pistols, most notably the toggle-action German Luger. Then he moved on to guns and rifles, spending the most time going over the quirks of the Tokarev submachine gun. Babik carried the Russian weapon at all times, and while that model saw a lot of action in the forests of Eastern Poland, everyone knew it was difficult to repair and maintain.

On another day, I spent several fascinating hours—for I had never been a better student than when I learned about the weapons of war—reviewing the characteristics of various hand grenades. The German stick grenade, for example, was activated by removing the closing cap in the long handle and pulling the cord inside. But there were other types of grenades I needed to be aware of: from Germany, the *Panzerwurfmine*, a strange elliptical stick grenade with four aerodynamic canvas fins that sprang out when thrown; and from Russia, the RG-42, which used a ring and handle much like the British and American grenades, but looked less like a sleek pineapple and more like a squat, rectangular, metal oil can.

Babik used a pencil and paper to draw diagrams of the various guns, rifles, and grenades. He drilled me on ammunition, explosives handling, range of weaponry, and military tactics. He put a pinhole in a piece of paper so I could

practice my marksmanship without wasting bullets. He even diagrammed his plans for upcoming robberies. Babik believed in leaving nothing to chance.

There were times when he left me alone for hours on end at night, sometimes disappearing completely. Other times he met with various individuals (*Criminal gangs? Partisans? Other escapees?*) at such a distance that I could make out only shadowy figures. When Babik returned from these engagements, he was tight-lipped about who he had met and what was discussed. He made it clear he would indulge no questions on the subject.

So I was more than a little surprised when one night my master led me to a clearing in the forest. There I came face-to-face with a swarthy young man who wore ragged clothes along with what appeared to be German military boots.

"This is the Gypsy," Babik said. "Names aren't important."

The young man—he had to be in his mid-twenties, no older—had the dark, chiseled looks I had observed in the gypsies who lived in the nearby Tarnow area before the war. I suspected that they, like the Jews, were interchangeable as targets for German bullets. This was the first time I had come across a gypsy in the forest.

"Don't wonder about how he got here," Babik said. "Just pay attention to what he shows you."

For the next several nights, the mysterious young man met me in the same place, training me in judo, hand-to-hand combat, and self-defense. I learned how to apply pressure at the right points to bring a man down. I learned the art of the garrote, and—should nothing be available but my bare hands—how to snap an enemy's neck before he has the chance to cry out.

To be honest, I was rather surprised by how readily I embraced this training. *Are you prepared to end another person's life?* I asked myself. *Better theirs than yours,* came my internal response.

By our third night together, the Gypsy declared me to be as proficient with my hands as I would be with a weapon. Babik was away that night, either meeting or robbing someone (or both, for the night was long).

I came right out and bluntly asked the Gypsy, "Are you a partisan?"

The young man seemed surprised by my direct question. He gave me a piercing look. "What do you know of the partisans?"

"Well, some time ago, I heard they were, uh, doing things against the Germans."

I had heard a little about the ragtag freedom fighters, gleaned that groups were being organized in the ghettos and in the forests. Still, I had no knowledge of the differing politics behind the groups or of the growing animosity between them.

"Does Ba—" The Gypsy caught himself, began again. "Does the big man ever talk about the partisans?"

"No, never. He does not like to talk about much of anything."

"Then you should follow his example."

I looked down, surprised by the reprimand. The response was, in its own way, the answer to my question.

As the next night ended, the Gypsy announced that he was finished with my tutoring.

"There's only so much I can show you. The rest you'll learn by doing. From what I hear, you're about to get your chance."

"Why me? Why are you teaching me these things?"

I didn't expect an answer, but for some reason, the Gypsy responded.

"Because you look like a child, you may succeed at many ... things ... others of us can't get away with." Then his face softened, and his eyes locked with mine. "Soon we'll see your real measure as a man, and let me tell you something: it has

nothing to do with how tall you stand.”

I felt ready for whatever followed. While I still had no heart for endangering simple peasants whose homes and farms we continued to rob, striking back against the Germans and their informers, I knew, would be another matter entirely.

I thought back to how my own family had been taken away from our home, to the hellish things I witnessed in Sedziszow shortly thereafter, and it came to me at that moment, an epiphany that transcended all other insights: if death, as it seemed, was indeed my inescapable destiny, *this* is how I wanted to die.

“Give me a gun,” I said to the dark-complected young man who had drilled me mercilessly, “and I will not hesitate to use it.”

I was filled with resolve, and something else: fury. It was an anger I had not felt before, a conviction long overdue, and it fit me like a glove.

“Everything I ever cared about—everything—has been taken from me,” I continued, clenching my right hand into a tight fist.

“Now it is time to take something back.”

4. Sedziszow

“Achtung, Juden! Open at once !”

Gita and I were deep in sleep. I never knew if it was the loud knocking that woke us, or the piercing sound of Mama’s terrified scream.

She had just come in from the storage shed, and the pail of flour she carried flew out of her hand and clattered to the floor. Papa must have been answering the morning’s first call of nature out back when several German soldiers approached the house, for he was already in their custody. Soon it would

be daylight. The brooding sky was becoming pale to the east.

"Children, it will be all right," Mama said, without much conviction. She opened the door.

A tall German soldier glared at her and quickly surveyed the room beyond, looking at Gita and I as we stood by our beds, terrified. The soldier had Papa firmly in his grip. After a moment or two, he relaxed his hold on my father and pushed him into the room, nearly knocking Mama off her feet. Behind and to the side of this first soldier stood a second, his rifle pointed at us.

I guessed that the tall German was no more than 22 or 23, and the circles under his eyes made it obvious he had been sleep deprived for a long time. *Doing what?* I wondered.

"You are being relocated." The soldier's voice held no trace of emotion. We strained to understand his rapid-fire German.

"You have five minutes to gather up one small bag per person, with a change of clothes, a cup, and any necessities you'll need for the next two days. Hand me any money and valuables now for safekeeping. If we discover you have taken any such things with you, or hidden them from us, you will be shot. Do you understand?" He did not wait for an answer. "Leave all other possessions here. When you are resettled we will see about getting your things to you. *Mach schnell!*"

My mother and father hurried to comply under the watchful eyes of the soldiers. Gita put her hands to her face and began to sob uncontrollably. I went over to her and held her loosely, uncomfortably, as if she might break. Then I pulled back, not quite knowing what else to do. Mama moved in, cradling Gita in her arms.

Although terribly frightened myself, I recall putting on a brave facade. It felt like everything was happening in slow motion, as if I were dreaming it all.

Quickly I threw on my clothes—dark cotton pants and a slightly soiled jersey—in silence.

“No, son, you’ll go *clean*,” Mama called out in a frantic voice, when she spotted the jersey I had on.

What does it matter? I thought, but it somehow seemed important to her. I changed my top.

I noticed that the two young soldiers were eyeing Gita, their expressions not hiding what had to be lascivious thoughts. I wanted to pummel them, rip them apart, and I am not certain what held me back. Possibly it was that one of the soldiers briefly turned his attention to me, then turned to the other and muttered something both men seemed to find quite funny. The only word I caught was “sheep,” and perhaps that was enough for me to sense their thoughts, because at that moment I conjured up a strange image: the body of a sheep, all white and woolly, but with my own frightened face. Soon I was joined by another such creature, and then many more, each with a different face. Now there were hundreds, perhaps thousands of us, following submissively in a long line to some unseen destination. And we were pleading, bleating in Yiddish, our voices trembling in the panicked disharmony of terror and anguish.

We were crying “help us, help us.”

But of course, no one heard.

The wooden horse carts were lined up at the bridge, just past Rycz’s house and store. There were four wagons in all, three already filled to overflowing with Jewish families from the nearby villages of Czarna and Grabiny. About a dozen soldiers were overseeing the roundup here, and we would soon realize that German forces were dispersed throughout the area, where the scene was repeating itself in every village and farm community. The Nazis had finally gotten around

to cleansing the rural countryside of its Jews.

The wagon drivers were local Poles. They sat impassively, clenching their reins, awaiting further instruction from their German masters. If they felt any emotion about what they were doing, they hid those feelings well. I recognized two of the men: Straszecin residents, one a casual acquaintance of my father. Doing the bidding of the Germans, driving Straszecin's Jews out of town—willingly? I felt a wave of disgust along with my fear.

Flanked by two soldiers with drawn rifles, we left our little house behind as we were prodded toward the bridge. We walked together, my little family, two by two, each carrying our small parcels.

As we got to the road, I looked over my shoulder and saw that Regula next door had come out of his house just in time to witness our departure. I might have been mistaken, but I could have sworn there were tears in the man's eyes.

Gita, meanwhile, was still inconsolable. Mama, fighting back her own tears, hugged my sister closely as they walked.

"Mama, where are they taking us?" I heard her whimper. "What's happening?"

"I'm not sure," Mama answered. "Probably we're being resettled in Debica. We've heard for months now that the Jews are all living in one area. It will be all right, my darling. Somehow, it will be all right."

I wondered if deep down she really knew what to think. Had her brothers in Mokre also been driven from their homes that morning? And my grandparents, they were elderly. What about them?

Papa and I walked just ahead, saying nothing. He was drawn and stoic, looking only forward. Although I was anxious and frightened, I somehow had the presence of mind to take in everything going on around me: the determined soldiers, uprooting Jews as easily as taking canned goods off a store shelf; the

frantic families on the wagons, including one with two screaming babies; the inquisitive by-standers, coming out of their own homes to see their neighbors being led away at gunpoint.

I remember thinking, *what a spectacle we must be, walking anxiously toward waiting wagons, while across the street and along the block, our neighbors watch with nothing more than curiosity. Well, they're frightened too*, I decided charitably. And then, reconsidering: *But most likely they don't give a damn about us; to them, we're just Jews.*

At that moment, I heard the sounds of two more horse carts and the shouts of soldiers coming into town from the north, along the road leading in from Wola Wielka. Even before they came into sight, I knew who would be on one of the wagons: *Bubbie and Zayde*, my beloved grandparents.

My family was ordered into a wagon that already held several people from another village. Moments later, five more people would be shoved into our same wagon: Moishe Rycz, his wife, and their three daughters. All dressed in their best clothes as if they were headed to synagogue on Yom Kippur.

I watched them being led from their house, and there seemed to be some sort of altercation. I was not sure what had started it—perhaps some resistance on Rycz's part—but the disturbance ended as the butt of a soldier's rifle sharply hit the man in the shoulder, knocking him to the ground. Rycz had picked himself up and was roughly being pushed with the rest of his family toward the cart. When they got in, I could barely move, so tightly were we packed.

By now the sun, red as blood, had risen over the eastern horizon. The day already held the promise of warmth and light. It was early May, the fields had been planted, and wildflowers were blooming along the road, yellows and blues and purples in brilliant profusion. Why do I remember trifling details of such beauty amidst the on-going horror?

The wagons began to move. Mama put her arm tightly around Gita, who turned to look back at our little village for what would be the last time.

The wagon carrying my grandparents had also joined the procession as we rolled toward Debica. I tried to call to them, as did my father, but they were three wagons behind; neither of our voices could rise above the cries of frightened prisoners and the staccato shouts of impatient German soldiers.

Entering Debica's city center, we soon passed the synagogue, where new anti-Semitic insults had been painted. Mama kissed her fingertips, then let her arm drift toward the structure as we passed. I noticed her silent gesture and realized she meant the kiss for the Torahs inside. But they were long gone, I suppose. Ashes and dust.

The wagon train attracted the attention of the townspeople. They tried to gather on the street corners to watch the procession, as if we were a lively Gypsy caravan. Whenever more than three or four Poles grouped together to stare, they were quickly dispersed by German soldiers. There were no Jews among the on-lookers, of course. Those still remaining in town were somewhere behind ghetto walls, unseen by us as we passed by.

"Mama, we're leaving Debica," Gita cried with alarm, as we continued eastward. "If we're not being resettled with the Jews here, where are they taking us?"

My mother tried once again to calm her down. "Perhaps Ropczyce," she said. "Or Rzeszow. Maybe the ghettos there have more room for families like ours."

But I am certain Mama was finding it difficult to come up with any logical possibilities. She looked over to me, and I could sense the hopelessness in her eyes, even as she spoke reassuring words to Gita.

Throughout the day our grim caravan grew larger, as more wagons—each

overfilled with Jewish families from other small villages—joined the procession. All ages were represented: babies and toddlers, up through men and women in their eighties.

Debica was far behind us now, and Ropczyce, as well. There were at least thirty wagons, each driven by a dour-faced Pole, flanked front and back by German soldiers. We had no protection from the intense sun which glinted down from a nearly cloudless sky. I felt ashamed that as the day wore on, I had to relieve myself right where I stood inside the wagon. I took little solace in the fact that I was not alone in this regard.

After a time, Gita had stopped her wailing, but now two of the Rycz daughters began to sob quietly. I could hear Moishe and his wife speaking softly to them. A few feet away, Mama and Papa were also speaking in a low whisper. Words between a husband and wife: simple endearments, perhaps, or—who knows?—expressions of regret? Despair at their powerlessness to protect Gita and me?

I looked over at my sister, but she was staring listlessly at some distant point. I left her alone, deciding that her mind, for the moment, was probably in a better place. Anyway, there was not much I could say. In spite of our occasional bickering and teasing, we were close, the two of us, and I regret now that I did not feel up to the task of offering her some comfort. My own heart ached with fear and uncertainty.

The day waned. Crying and conversation had been replaced by a solemn gloom of despondence and apprehension. Where would this relocation take place? What additional sacrifices would we have to make?

Hours later, the tension was palpable as our wagons rolled to a stop, and dusk settled over us, dank and oppressive, in the little town of Sedziszow.

The drivers, returning to their villages with their empty wagons, bore witness to at least some of what happened that night in Sedziszow.

The wagons were unloaded, and we were marched on foot two blocks to Sedziszow's central square.

"This town is smaller than Debica," Gita observed as we walked, still together as a family. "Why would they move us here?"

"Maybe it's just for the night," I offered. "The horses can't pull us day and night without a rest." At the time it seemed to sense.

"We'll know soon enough," said Mama, no longer trying to make sense of anything. Papa, meanwhile, had lagged behind, looking for his parents. He assumed they would be moving more slowly, somewhere further back in the line.

"Faster, faster!" barked the German soldiers, as they herded us toward the square.

"Soon your journey will be over," added another, and he laughed, dauntingly, high and shrill.

I gasped as we turned a corner and faced the central square. It was brightly illuminated, criss-crossed by dozens of flood lights. I had never seen this many German soldiers in one place. My senses were heightened, every nerve synapse wound tight. The air, it seemed, was unusually still. From somewhere behind me lingered the smell of excrement.

And then I became aware that up ahead, a few SS men were busily separating each family as they came to the head of the line.

"Women and small children, to the right," I could hear them hollering, over a jumble of pleas and cries. "Men, straight ahead. Quickly, or you will be shot!"

"What are they saying?" Gita cried out, although she probably understood the German only too well.

“Moniek and Papa will be in a different line,” Mama answered, with tremendous apprehension. “Only for a while, I would hope.” Then, to me: “Son, stay by your father. He’s just behind.”

“I will, Mama,” I said, as we drew very near to the separation area. I was filled with emotion, choking back sobs. I called out, “I’ll see you soon. You too, Gita.”

With all the tumult all around, I wasn’t sure if they heard. I looked back to see if my father had located my grandparents, but could not spot any of them in the jostling crowd of desperate souls.

“Women and small children, to the right. Men, straight ahead,” came the orders again, this time louder, more emphatic.

In moments we were right beside the impassive Nazi officers who were splitting off the families. I saw them gesture angrily for me to continue directly ahead. I looked over my shoulder as Mama and Gita were pushed to the right. Mama reached out to touch me one last time, but the crush of people separated us. There was anguish in her face as she was swept, with Gita, into the group of women and babies being held to the right of the square. They were flanked by a curious line-up of large wooden barrels, empty sentinels to what was to come.

I found myself among a large group of men. I immediately looked toward the entrance of the square, hoping to see my father. All the time, more frightened families were continuing to pour in and face separation. Papa was nowhere to be seen. The women and their screaming children were now to my left, waiting expectantly. Waiting for what?

As I looked around, I became aware of another group forming far to my right, being forced single file, more or less, into a long line at the edge of the square. In that assembly, I saw only handicapped and elderly people, men and women alike. With alarm, I realized that the men in my own group were all

reasonably fit and healthy, none appearing to be much older than 50.

Looking back toward the elderly group, I began to scan the anxious faces. My heart leaped when I saw them: my *Bubbie* and *Zayde*, there, near the far end of the line. They were apprehensively touching their finger tips together and trembling, like two fragile autumn leaves. I wanted to call out to them, but pandemonium reigned and I was too far away.

In the next moment, I heard the throaty sound of an engine. I watched as a senior SS officer arrived at the square on the sidecar of a chauffeur-driven motorcycle. From both his entrance and demeanor, the man appeared to be in charge of this *aktion*, as the Germans called it. I would never forget the intense look that I saw in his face: fanaticism, perhaps, or just pure hatred. *Was there really any difference between the two?* I wondered.

A howl of anguish rose suddenly to my left—cries of such piercing pain, it struck me as being almost inhuman in origin. I turned in that direction, toward the women's group, searching for Mama and Gita. I could not spot them, because soldiers had moved in among the women. What I saw taking place there, just meters away from where I stood, paralyzed me with fear.

This can't be happening! I thought at the time, and I think it anew each of the hundreds of times the scene replays itself, even now, in my nightmares:

SS men are singling out all the women with babies and small children, brutally driving them toward the barrels. One after another, screaming babies are pried from the protective arms of their hysterical mothers by the callous monsters of the SS. One after another, the babies are stuffed into the barrels as if they were nothing more than freshly pickled cucumbers. When a barrel can hold no more babies, the cover is placed tightly on top and the next barrel is filled.

One of the officers, in particular, seems greatly amused by this activity. A frail child of two, perhaps two-and-a-half, has squirmed out of his grasp,

screaming for her mother. She flops to the ground, where she shrieks louder still. At first it seems that the soldier is going to bend down and pick up the girl, but instead he kicks her and laughs as her tiny broken body lands several meters away. Teeth clenched, he picks the broken child up by her feet, and jams her headfirst into an already crowded barrel. In a final act of hate and defiance, the beast unzips his pants and urinates into the barrel before slamming down the lid...

I was still reeling from this horror when across the square, to my right, I heard a different sound. I spun around in time to see the last rutilant flashes of heavy machine gun fire. In agonizing disbelief I witnessed the massacre of my beloved grandparents, along with all the others in their group. A river of red soon began to flow downhill between the gray cobble stones.

I screamed, but my cries were hardly heard over all the other screaming, over the sobbing, the sounds of people vomiting, of people dying, of innocent little babies in closed barrels, suffocating. All I wanted to do was to escape the insanity. I cannot explain this, but at that moment, I did not think about locating my father or about staying in the square to be near my mother and sister. Instead, operating purely on instinct, or panic, or maybe insanity, I turned my back on the carnage taking place all around.

And—choking back tears and bile and the stench of death—I simply walked away.

Trembling, I stumbled into the night, leaving from the opposite side of the square. At first I blended into a small group of Polish villagers who were watching the slaughter. From there I walked away without so much as a second glance from the preoccupied soldiers. It was almost as if I were invisible.

Soon the chaos faded into the background, the bright lights of the square

no more than a weak smudge against the inky sky.

I came to a farm just outside the town and made my way toward a stack of hay piled in an old cow barn. How long was it since I had been awakened by the pounding on the door? 18 hours at least. I burrowed into the hay, closed my eyes, and tried to get the images of death out of my mind. Over and over again, I envisioned the helpless babies and saw my grandparents fall to the ground. But after a time, a numbing silence washed over me like a benediction, and out of sheer exhaustion, I slept.

When I awoke hours later, the sun was well above the horizon. Like a boy possessed, I headed back toward the Sedziszow central square, guided not by any rational thought, but rather without conscious thought at all. My feet were sore from the thin-soled shoes I had been wearing, and my lightweight jacket did little to ward off the morning chill. Still, foolish as it sounds, I walked, zombie-like, drawn back in search of my family.

When I got to the square, it was deserted. Even the barrels were gone, their rotting human refuse nowhere to be seen. A few blocks farther, I came upon barbed wire barricades, heavily patrolled by German soldiers. A make-shift ghetto, I assumed. This time, my common sense took hold, and I stopped in my tracks, before I could be spotted. Then I turned away, hurriedly leaving the wretched town for a second time, more frightened and confused than ever.

For more than twelve hours I walked, skirting the larger cities of Ropczyce and Debica, back to my home village of Straszecin. With every step I heard sounds in my head: voices in German (*Soon your journey will be over, ha-ha!*); voices in Yiddish (*Son, stay by your father. He's just behind*); voices that transcended all languages, that manifested themselves only in screams of terror, in wails of mothers and babies and small children.

And while I could not get the horror out of my mind, another part of my

brain spun a fantasy that back home, my family would be waiting for me.

“Oh, Moniek,” Mama would say, “now that we’re all together again—you, Gita, Papa and me—we’ll leave Poland, we’ll go to our family in America where everything is wonderful and the war won’t touch us.”

It was possible, was it not?

But the house stood empty. Neither my parents, nor my sister, were waiting for me. My grandparents had not stopped by to *shmooze* with me, Uncle Isaac did not show up, grinning, with a juicy cut of brisket. *Has he been taken away, too?* I wondered.

I considered knocking on Regula’s door, or Lahowska’s across the street, but it was very late, and I was not sure who could be trusted. So I kept on walking, deep into a stand of birch trees, where I collapsed onto the forest floor which welcomed me as if it were a feather bed. I slept in fits for a few hours, disoriented and alone, wondering what to do, where to go next.

I awoke drenched in sweat. Musky droplets of perspiration matted my soiled shirt to my body. In my head, the cries of babies were joined by the sound of machine gun fire. And voices, speaking German. Not a dream, it had been real. The elderly, the babies, they were gone. But where were my parents? What about Gita?

Refusing to acknowledge the dangers I would face—or, more to the point, simply not caring—I once more set out on foot, heading east again, to search for my family. For the third time, now, I was drawn back into the evil that had consumed Sedziszow.

It was early morning when I arrived. I had walked all night, guided only by the faint light of a quarter moon. I ignored the cold, and the soreness of my feet, and the emptiness in my stomach. I gave little thought to myself at all until I began zigzagging through the city, walking alongside groups of townspeople. Now

was not a time, I realized, to draw attention myself. To all appearances I was just another ragamuffin boy, a dispirited little Polish kid looking for something to do to pass the hours in this war-torn town.

My search ended at the railroad station.

There, amidst a hive of commotion and activity, I saw a line of boxcars, like the ones which had transported my father's livestock. This time, the cars were being loaded with human cargo.

Pressing forward with a small group of curious bystanders, I frantically scanned the anguished faces as women were poked, prodded and brutally shoved into the sturdy freight cars. There were easily a hundred people in each one, confined to spaces that were built to hold perhaps a half dozen cows.

My last memory of Mama and Gita would, in the next few moments, be engraved on my conscious mind for all time; an image too horrible to remember, too cherished to forget:

I see her, this tragic figure of my mother, standing just inside the open door of the third boxcar. Her arms are wrapped protectively around Gita—poor, terrified Gita—while her eyes dart over the crowd of indifferent soldiers and Polish onlookers.

Seconds before a soldier slides the door shut and fastens it securely with wire, Mama spots me in the crowd. Our eyes lock, I am sure of it, and her head nods almost imperceptibly. She seems to tighten her hold on Gita in that instant, stroking my sister's beautiful raven-hued hair, yet all the while her eyes are fixed on me, her expression never changing. I can only guess what words are on her unmoving lips, stifled in her throat, for fear of giving me away. I only know that in this last, selfless moment, she has, for now, saved my life.

Devastated, I turned away from the train station, wondering what became of the men's group. Papa had to be with them somewhere, I assumed. I entertained a fleeting thought about sticking around to look for him, but I did not.

Instead, for the third time in as many days, I walked away unhindered from Sedziszow. Again, I headed back to Straszecin, seeking the anonymity of the surrounding forests. I was bewildered, unsure of what to do next. It was the first time in my life that I had been totally on my own.

This time, I harbored no illusions that my family would be at the house. I also knew it would be dangerous to seek shelter there, but I did stop by briefly to look in the window. No point in going inside; the house had been looted. Cleaned out by Germans? Neighbors? Even the stove had been partially disassembled, to use for replacement parts, I suppose.

For the first several days I kept to myself, cowering in the forest, finding little in the way of food. I had never before known such hunger. My only nourishment came from a few early-growing vegetables, which I stole with no hesitation from the fields at night.

Finally, I summoned the courage to call on Regula, and when the sky grew dark, I cautiously made my way through familiar fields and tapped lightly on my neighbor's side window.

At first there was no response, so I pounded harder. Someone was coming into the room. A face peered out at me. Regula. He opened the window, and I saw tears—this time there could be no mistaking them—flooding down the man's cheek. Behind Regula's moist face, flickering kerosene lamps created ghostly shadows which danced mischievously on the wall.

"Moniek, is it really you?"

I assured him it was.

"Thank God you're alive! We heard everyone who was taken to Sedziszow

was either killed or ... or sent away.”

“Not everyone.” I said evenly. “I escaped.”

Regula did not hide his feelings. “I cry for you. I cry for your mother and father and sister. I cry for us all. Where have you been hiding?”

I told him: Everywhere. Nowhere.

“Stanislaw was upset when you were ... taken,” Regula continued through the open window, his voice still choking. “As for Anna, she was inconsolable.”

Anna! I swallowed hard.

“For the present, I think it will be best if you and I keep your escape a secret. In time, I’ll let my children know you’re all right.”

I nodded. The thought of seeing Anna once more, sharing my grief with her, made my pulse race. But I knew her father was right. It would expose her to tremendous danger. I was an outlaw now, and my crime, as far as I could tell, was being born a Jew.

“You’re a very brave boy,” Regula said with a gentle smile.

It occurred to me that I did not feel brave. I had, in fact, no feelings at all. Part of me had been taken away with the others.

Regula regarded me with obvious concern. “The nights are still chilly this time of year. You shouldn’t be in the forest. I have no place to hide you in my house, but I have an idea. Meet me in the back.”

Behind Regula’s house, on the side opposite from where our house stood, was a tiny storage shed. In it, our neighbor kept dried food for his animals and a supply of hay. With his hands, Regula dug out a sort of cave, no bigger than a wash basin, behind the dried food.

“You should be safe here for a while,” Regula told me while I crawled into the tiny space. “And the rest of my family doesn’t have to know. As for the Germans, it’s not likely they’ll realize you’re missing, at least not yet, but I don’t

put anything past them. Better that you stay out of sight.”

He left me inside the meager hollow with some bread and cooked potatoes, covering the opening with hay. I tried to push the madness of Sedziszow out of my mind, at least for a little while, but that was impossible. I dozed off and on, but my thoughts kept returning to my parents, to my sister Gita, to my grandparents, their fingers touching—or so I imagined it—even now, even in death.

And Anna. Before the horror, there was Anna.

My mind is back in the late spring of 1940. For the first time, I am seeing the girl next door in a whole new light.

Confined to my small village since my rock-throwing incident the previous fall, I am consumed by loneliness. At the same time, my hormones have stirred up uncomfortable and unfamiliar feelings. Add to this mix Anna herself, blonde and ebullient, who at age 11 has already begun to show the first signs of physical maturity. She emerges one day from her cottage as if it has been her chrysalis, or so it seems to me. Suddenly, she's no longer the little tag-along neighbor kid. It's not her brother Stanislaw who I want to spend time with now, it's Anna, and I pursue her almost daily. She does not discourage me. She is flattered, I imagine, by the attention of an older boy. Plus, from what I can tell, she has always shown a liking for me.

Initially, her father's storage shed becomes our secret meeting place. But as the summer progresses and the wheat grows taller, we sneak off into either of our families' fields. There, hidden amid the tall stalks, we talk and share chaste, playful kisses.

“Why do the kids at school say bad things about the Jews?” she asks me. We are lying on our backs, side by side, looking up at the fast-moving clouds

through the heads of the wheat stalks that sway above us. "They barely know any Jews, but they call you all Christ killers. You didn't kill Jesus Christ, did you?"

I grin at the question, although I know it isn't funny. "Not that I can remember," I say. Then, growing more solemn, I add, "I guess they don't like that we're not Catholics like they are. They think that to be Polish, you have to be Catholic."

"I'm Catholic and I wouldn't say anything bad about you. My father even says the Jews are smarter than we are. Do you think you're smarter than the other kids? Are you smarter than me?"

"That's ridiculous, that's what I think." I roll over on my side, facing Anna, and prop myself up with one arm. My voice gives away my sudden alarm. "You haven't told your father about ... our spending so much time together?"

She smiles. "Of course not, silly. He likes your family, and he certainly has no bad feelings about Jews, but I don't think he'd like me sneaking off like this with one. Even if it's you."

"My mother would feel the same way," I admit. "And my father too, if he were here. Even before the Germans came, my parents said the goyim will turn against us if there's war."

"What's a goyim?" Anna asks.

"It's a word in the language we use at home. It means gentiles. Non-Jews. We use that expression so much, I never think to use the Polish word, even when I speak Polish."

"Well, your parents were wrong. The war has come, and my family hasn't turned against you. They never would. They hate the Germans." Then she asks, "Does Gita know we go off to ... talk?"

"Gita knows everything about me."

Anna gasps.

"Don't worry, she can keep a secret. We watch out for each other."

Anna sits up, pulling up her legs and wrapping her arms around them. She rests her chin on her knee. "I wish I had a twin. Stanislaw always picks on me. He'd tell my parents in an instant if he knew we were here."

"Then we won't ever let him find out," I tell her. Impulsively, I pop up also, and give Anna a peck on the cheek. "Besides, I've seen how he looks at my sister, so he shouldn't be one to talk. Gita can't stand him, by the way."

And we giggle, sharing this moment of innocence and delight, of secrets and wonder, while overhead the clouds fill and darken, moving swiftly toward the east, as if to escape the storm front that's coming in just behind.

Twice the next day Regula checked on me and brought me fresh food. My brief reveries of Anna made me feel ashamed, after the grim reality of what I had just experienced in Sedziszow. I cursed God, searching for answers. None were forthcoming.

I knew what the consequences would be, of course, if I were discovered. Harm would not come not just to me. All the Regulas, Anna included, would be subject to—who knew what? Sheltering a Jew was as punishable a crime as *being* a Jew.

Not wanting to put my neighbors in jeopardy, I slipped away quietly the next day and ventured back into the forest. I was determined to make it on my own. At least summer was approaching, with temperate weather that might help me learn to live with only the shelter I would find in nature. Soon enough autumn would come, the temperatures would drop, and hiding in the forests would require far greater survival skills. I shuddered at the thought.

Before long, it became evident that I was not the only one in hiding. As I went foraging for food at night, I occasionally saw places where carrots had been

uprooted and cucumber vines had already been picked clean, suggesting that others were stealing food as well. Once, as I was approaching an enticing garden just north of Straszecin, I caught a fleeting glimpse of a frightened figure—an older man, from the way his form moved rather stiffly—shuffling off into the shadows.

But for the time being, I stayed to myself, trusting no one, quite unaware that to the east, the Germans had just marched across the Russian border. The war was expanding. The invasion of Eastern Galicia and Russia had begun.

5. Saboteur

“Everyone is low on ammunition,” Babik informed me a few days after my last meeting with the Gypsy. He did not clarify his use of the word “everyone.” “Besides, you need a weapon for yourself.”

I had been thinking the same thing. The weapon of my rage was no longer enough.

“The time has come to see how good a student you been. What you’re going to do for me will mean risking your life, but without bullets we’re good as dead, anyway.”

I felt a surge of adrenaline. I was a new Moishe/Moniek Goldner, no longer a shy boy but a man, eager to prove myself.

“Tell me.”

Babik explained the plan. There would be others nearby, out of sight, but the success of the operation—and whether or not I lived through it—would rely solely on my actions. The details were simple, yet my mentor forced me to rehearse my actions over and over.

“No,” Babik said more than once, like an acting coach shaping the movements of an eager young thespian. “It’s got to look like you don’t see them coming. Work on your timing.”

Then he added a piece of motivation no acting student ever heard from his teacher: “The slightest misstep, and we might get away. You, on the other hand, will most certainly be shot.”

“Let’s go through this one more time,” I said.

Two hours later, Babik was satisfied.

It was to be a daylight operation, so we set out the following morning before sun-up. It had rained during the night and the ground was damp as Babik and I trudged for nearly two hours through forests and fields. Already the sky was beginning to lighten as we arrived at a carefully chosen point just outside the village of Podgrodzie. There we crouched in a small ravine along the main road that connected Tarnow to Debica. If others were present, as I had been led to believe, I did not see them.

Silently, we waited. From time to time, Babik checked the watch he had stolen from a wealthy landowner months before. Somewhere nearby, a raven gave a shrill ca-caw, ca-caw, as if sounding a warning. I felt both fear and excitement intertwined. My senses were charged with anticipation.

At last Babik said, “It’s time. The Krauts may be crazy bastards, but they’re also punctual.” He looked at me sternly. “You know what to do, kid. Now do it.”

I nodded. “Good bye,” I said, not knowing if it was a temporary or final farewell, and equally uncertain whether I much cared one way or another.

From a small cache of weapons Babik carried inside the lining of his coat, he took out a grenade and handed it to me. Russian, this one. The “oil can.” I gripped it firmly, depressing the handle. Then I pulled the pin, letting it fall to the damp ground. Once the handle was released, I knew, there would be just five

seconds until it exploded. A lot of terrible things could happen in those few seconds. I pushed the thought out of my mind.

The jacket I wore—not my child’s jacket but another, one that was far too big for my five-foot frame—was perfect for the plan. The long sleeves hid the grenade which lay cradled in my right hand. In my left hand I carried a narrow branch, pulled from a dead tree an hour earlier.

I climbed out of the ditch, where Babik remained crouched, and went to the road. With a quick glance back at the expressionless Babik, I turned toward the southwest and began walking. Not along the side of the road, but right down the center.

To unknowing eyes, I was a small boy wandering aimlessly; a frail gamin with no sense of purpose, no place to go, and all the time in the world to get there. From time to time I poked my stick into the surface of the road, scattering little clumps of stones that were still damp from the rain.

Then I saw it, far ahead, at a point just before the road disappeared over a hill: an approaching vehicle, just visible over the crest, coming toward me. *Right on schedule*, I thought. *Someone has done their homework.*

I looked down, staring only at the road directly in front of my feet. I kept on walking. My heart began to pound. Fear rose in me like boiling water. This was not proving to be as easy, I realized, as it had seemed during rehearsals in the forest.

“It’s got to look like you don’t see them coming.” Babik’s words echoed in my head. I continued the charade, poking my stick offhandedly in the dirt, more meandering than walking.

The oncoming vehicle rattled noisily, approaching rapidly. It was almost on top of me.

I heard the blaring of a horn. The open-topped transport, filled with

perhaps a dozen shouting German soldiers, had spotted me.

“What the hell’s that kid doing in the road?” was the gist of what I overheard. The word “*kind*” was a good sign; they took me to be a child.

“Move! Get out of the way!” they shouted.

I looked up suddenly, a startled rabbit seemingly frozen by unexpected movement. Not playing a role, this time. I wondered for a moment if they would simply run me down. Then, a sound that helped me breathe easier: the loud squeal of brakes.

As the truck screeched to a stop just a few yards in front of me, I jumped to my left as if to get out of the way. In the same smooth movement, I swung my right arm in a practiced underhanded arc, pitching the grenade with just enough impetus to roll it halfway underneath the transport. Or so I hoped.

Five seconds. Four seconds.

I turned to run. I heard soldiers start to jump off the truck.

Three seconds.

The sound of rifle shots. Firing at me?

Two seconds.

More shouting. Then an explosion of tremendous force, louder than any sound I had ever heard. The ground, shaking. Pieces of truck and flesh and bone, flying everywhere. My small body, running, exhilarated, miraculously unscathed by the raining fire and debris, my doing, my devastation.

From somewhere beside the road, Babik came bounding out. Three men were with him, two of whom I had not seen before. The third was the Gypsy, who ran past, giving me an approving nod.

“Well done, little one,” said one of the strangers, a seedy fellow who Babik later told me had killed the one officer with the presence of mind to jump off the truck just before the grenade exploded. The officer had been in the process of

pointing his rifle. At me.

“Wait here,” Babik shouted to me, and I did as I was told.

I watched as the four men quickly scoured the area for weapons and ammunition that had survived the blast. Like scavengers, they combed through both body and truck parts alike, taking whatever had not been blown to bits. There was a sense of jubilation among the men as they amassed pistols, rifles and—most valuable of all—rounds of ammunition.

The three men, their arms loaded with weapons and bullets, ran off as Babik came back to where I was standing. He was carrying a pistol, ammunition, and a two pairs of boots he’d pulled off the feet of dead German soldiers.

“Let’s get the hell out of here,” he said. “The noise will bring others.”

We ran, and after a short while, once we were well away from the road and back in the protective shroud of trees, we paused for a moment to rest. For the first time since the operation began, Babik turned to look at me.

“These are for you, kid,” he said, handing me one pair of boots. “They’re probably too big, but they’re better than those pieces of shit you’re wearing now.”

Excitedly, I put them on. They were too big, but felt wonderful. *So this is what it feels like to walk in the footsteps of a Nazi*, I thought.

But Babik was not finished. “I think you earned this, too,” he said without emotion.

He handed me the captured Luger. Its textured steel was still warm from the tight grip of the young *Wehrmacht* soldier who had been holding it, until the blast had ripped his arm off at the elbow.

I examined the pistol closely, turning it in my hands, reverently, as if I had just been introduced to a new best friend.

I had.

Days later, in yet another hiding place in another nameless forest, Babik handed me a package. It was about three feet square, weighing maybe ten or twelve pounds, securely tied with twine. I wondered how the packaging materials had come to their hiding place deep in the forest. I knew enough not to ask what was inside the package; as it was, I had a pretty good idea.

“Take this into Debica,” Babik said, as if walking into the large city was of no consequence at all.

I knew Debica was teeming with Germans, and I had heard (from a Pole who was babbling nervously as I robbed him at gunpoint) that the Jews had all been taken from the ghetto several months earlier. I was given an address near my Aunt Enna’s apartment—former apartment. I committed the number to memory.

“They’ll give you an envelope in return,” Babik continued, gruffly. “Don’t come back without it.” Then, as an afterthought, a change in tone: “Be safe, Moniek.”

It was the first time he had called me by name.

After dark, I set out on the three-hour walk into the city. Although I knew that if I was caught, I would be killed—particularly in light of the weapons or ammunition I was undoubtedly carrying—I felt less fear than when I faced the German transport. My Luger was tucked securely into my waist band, and I would have no qualms about using it. But more than that, I had been trained well. Plus, what did I have to lose? I would do whatever Babik told me to do. It was the best chance I had to get through the war, and the most meaningful way to die if I did not.

By the time I arrived in the city, the hour was late and the streets were quiet. I stayed in the shadows, alert for any German soldiers who might be patrolling. From an alleyway directly in front of me, a noise made me jump and

pull out my pistol. A scrawny cat, not much bigger than the rats it had been chasing, jumped out and skittered away.

Breathing only a little easier, I eventually made my way to the assigned address. It was on a narrow side street, a small apartment above what was once an apothecary shop. The shop's windows had been broken and the interior stripped clean, by Germans, or Poles, or both. Not recently, either, but months earlier. Maybe longer, from the way things looked.

I rang the bell.

"Who?" came the single word which flitted down like a feather from a window above.

"From B.," I answered, following my instructions.

Moments later, I heard footsteps coming down the stairs. The door opened.

"Quickly, get off the street," said the man who stood there, a tall, thin fellow of about 35. He was missing two of his bottom teeth, and even in the shadows I could see the teeth that remained were yellowed and crooked. The man wore dirty pants and an undershirt, nothing else. Perhaps he owned nothing else.

Standing behind the door at the bottom of the stairs, the man snatched away the package I was carrying. He eyed me suspiciously.

"Now he sends a boy to do a man's work?"

I was in no mood to explain. "I got it here, didn't I?"

The man flashed a brief smile. "Wait here."

Taking the package, he climbed up the stairs and disappeared into his apartment. I heard the package being ripped open, and a moment later, a faint intake of breath as the man evaluated what was inside.

After a time, he came back downstairs, handing me a thick envelope in return.

"Tell B. he's outdone himself this time," the man grinned. Then, as an afterthought: "Can I trust you with this?"

I tucked the envelope into my trousers. "Do you have a choice?"

The man chuckled. "Hell, B seems to always know what he's doing, crazy as he gets sometimes."

Cautiously, he opened the door a tiny bit, looked out. All remained quiet.

"Go," he said. "And remember, you were never here."

That rankled me. "Mister, you're in the same danger as the rest of us. Only difference is, you got a roof over your head."

Then I slipped out into the treacherous night, dissolving once again into the shadows, soon putting the city behind me and covering my head with a canopy of stars.

Spring. Another forest near Debica. And standing directly in front of me, a glowering German officer.

"Moniek, this is Walkyrie," Babik said by way of introduction. "You'll use his code name."

"I've heard a lot about you, Moniek," said the German, in his own language.

I eyed the man warily. He was in his thirties, from the look of him, certainly no more than forty. Taller than Babik, pleasant looking, with hair as dark as Hitler's, from the photos I had once seen of the monster. Did not fit the Aryan stereotype any more than Hitler did. Dressed like everyone else in hiding: peasant clothes, probably stolen, seldom washed.

I looked past the German and addressed Babik icily. "What are you doing with the enemy?" My hatred was rising like reflux, and it burned in my throat.

"It's all right, Moniek," Babik responded calmly. "He don't care for Nazi politics. He defected some time ago to join ... others in the forest."

Why did Babik avoid using the word “partisan?” I wondered, calming down just a little.

Severity crept back into Babik’s voice. “Remember, I tell you who you trust, and who you don’t. This man’s not like them other Krauts. If I can accept that, so can you. You’re going to spend a lot of time with him. He’s going to teach you German like you was born there.”

At that, I raised my eyebrows, not hiding my skepticism. For the first time, I looked directly at the ex-Nazi officer, who returned my stare with no change in expression.

Babik went on, “You already know some Kraut words, yes? Your people speak a form of it, I understand. But that’s not enough. You got to speak it good, and understand it when it’s spoken back.”

“Why?”

“Why? When you brought that package into Debica—that was nothing. There could be times when you’re surrounded by the German sons-of-whores, by the SS, the Gestapo, maybe, and you’ll be pretending to be an orphaned Polish kid with no money, no nothing. If they buy your act—and you better hope they do—the stupid bastards won’t expect you to understand them, so you can maybe learn things that I can use. Who knows, what you overhear might even save your own miserable neck.”

He had been looking at me, but at that moment he glanced away and added, “I can tell you that from experience.”

I looked up at the German, who seemed to be growing impatient with the long explanation in Polish.

“When do we begin?” I asked in Yiddish, which I assumed was nearly the same as asking it in German.

The man’s face softened slightly. “Now,” he said. “We begin tonight. I

have better things to do than spend my summer being a schoolteacher.”

Learning fluent German came easily to me, not only because my family spoke Yiddish at home, but also because I had learned some German in school. Now I was being tutored several nights a week by a man who met me in varying locations that Babik had prearranged. On the other nights, Babik and I continued to rob homes and churches in surrounding villages, stockpiling as much food as we could.

I came to respect my German teacher, and often wondered what had prompted the soldier to leave the Nazi party, to take up with people who I assumed were partisans. I developed various scenarios: the man was half Jewish, and was about to be found out. Someone in his family had been victimized or killed by the SS. Or maybe the man simply had a foreboding that the Nazis would not win the war. He might have changed sides for reasons of conscience, or fear, or some personal vendetta—the forests of Poland were alive with the fantastic and the impossible, as I well knew.

During my lessons, Babik often disappeared until daybreak, and once, he stayed away for more than 24 hours. He returned to our lair late the following night, after my lesson had ended, carrying four pairs of supple German boots, two uniforms—one of them stained with blood—two rifles, several rounds of ammunition, and a handful of German marks.

“I was worried about you.” The first words out of my mouth.

I tried to understand my conflicting emotions. I still feared Babik a little, wondered what the crazy bastard might do to me should I no longer prove useful to him; yet I also needed the man, depended on his survival instincts, had even grown to like him. Or had I confused fondness with gratefulness?

“I can handle myself,” was Babik’s characteristically gruff response. Then, holding up his treasure, he said: “As you can see, while I was out, a couple friends

dropped in on me. The pleasure was all mine. The surprise was theirs.”

“What happened?” I asked, hoping to hear the details. It was a balmy night. We were above ground, sitting on the mossy forest floor. Surprisingly, Babik felt like talking.

“I met some ... friends last night in a wheat field near Lubzina. We lost track of time. Before we know it, the sky is already starting to get light. The others go their way, I go mine. I have a hiding place not too far from there, but to get there, I have to cross the main goddamn road. You know, the road that connects Debica and Sedziszow.”

I knew it well. I had been on that road in a long procession of wagons, was on it still, in my nightmares. *Mama, we're leaving Debica*, my sister Gita cried night after night. *Where are they taking us?*

I tried to focus on Babik's story.

“...not an ideal situation after dawn. There I am, crouched down in an ash grove that goes right up to the road.”

I waited breathlessly while Babik took a hearty gulp of vodka he produced from only he knew where. He wiped his mouth with his sleeve, took another pull from the bottle, let out a loud belch.

“I don't see no vehicles, so I go to run across. Then from the woods on the other side, just up the road, two Krauts come out. On foot, heading toward Debica. My guess is they been marching prisoners into the woods at dawn to shoot them, but who knows. Who the hell cares? I look on it as a gift from God. When they get within range of my weapon, I aim at their heads, to spare the uniforms. Nail the first one in the temple, have to fill the second one with bullet holes.”

He appeared lost in thought for a moment, then: “Lucky for me, no one comes along while I pull the bodies into the woods and strip them of their finery.

I cover them up best I can, with dirt and branches, but they'll be found before long. Then who knows how many innocent sons-of-bitches will have to pay?"

He shrugged, put the bottle to his lips once again. "Well, what can you do. Meanwhile, there's two less Krauts than there was yesterday, and these uniforms will fetch a good price."

"From the partisans?" I asked, feigning innocence.

"Your goddamn questions again," Babik snarled, then began to brood. I was sorry I had pushed him just when he was actually talking to me with more than grunts and short phrases.

Apparently, the mood had not been totally broken. He must have had second thoughts about the tone he took with me, because after a while he turned and said, "Kid, you been adapting real good to life on the run. Like living in the forest is second nature to you."

"I had more experience than I ever wanted," I said. "I was hiding in the forests for nearly two years before you found me with ... before you found me at the Grabiny station."

I could see furrows start to form across his forehead. I am sure he had no idea what I had been through, or how many times I came close to death before the day he came along and saved me. I waited to see if he would ask me for any details of this painful period, but he did not.

I shared some of them with him anyway. And for a while, he listened.

6. After Sedziszow

As you can imagine, the summer months that I was on my own, having escaped from the Germans at Sedziszow, were pure hell. Not a moment went by that I did

not think about my family. Physically, I was doing all right, I suppose. I knew the fields well, and helped myself to vegetables throughout the summer. There were carrots, cucumbers, cabbages, and by August, ripe, juicy tomatoes, all of which I greedily devoured. I also located a number of fruit trees that had been planted in the area, and picked apples and plums, not much caring if they were ripe or not. Under a luminous moon I even found chunks of bread curiously placed between the leafy tops of carrots in Regula's field, which told me that my raids were no secret to my neighbor. To me, coming across the bread was like finding the *afikomen* during Passover, an observation that brought on another flood of memories.

Fortunately, during this period I did not encounter any Germans searching for escaped Jews. During daylight hours, however, while I remained hidden in the forests or in the fields of tall wheat, I observed more soldiers on the roads than ever before.

Still, I had many moments of terror, like one day when I decided to leave the cover of the forest just before dark. My clothes had become so soiled and gamy, I could not wait another day to rinse them out in the river. The moon was just a meager slip, so I felt it would be too precarious to walk along the river if I waited until nightfall.

I had located a flat rock in the shallows near the river bank, and began kneading my wet shirt and pants against it, much like my mother kneaded the *challah* dough. Suddenly, I became aware of footsteps coming through the forest toward the river. They were muffled, tentative—someone approaching cautiously, trying to be silent, but not quite succeeding.

I quickly submerged my naked body in the cold river, lying flat and motionless against the shallow, stony bottom near the bank. The water covered all but my head. I waited to see who would emerge from the woods, but I did not

have the slightest idea what I would do if they were Germans or even local Poles. I blinked several times in the diminishing light, trying to focus on the solitary figure who was emerging from the cover of trees.

The intruder came into the clear and continued toward the river, clearly unaware of my presence. In an instant, my tension drained away as I recognized the familiar face of Moishe Rycz, Straszecin's other Jewish man. Like me, the shopkeeper had come to wash his clothes, including the fine white cotton shirt that I remembered he wore the day his family, like ours, was taken from Straszecin. He, too, must have somehow escaped!

Rycz looked older, more gaunt than I remembered. The man was in his early sixties, it was true, but his thinning hair seemed whiter, and his unshaven face reminded me of the beggars who used to wander through town, looking for food or other handouts. *We're all beggars now*, I realized. I wondered how bad I must look myself, then dismissed the thought because I really did not care.

Holding my wet clothes in front of me, I climbed up from the river. "*Pani Rycz!*" I called, in a loud whisper. "It's me, Moniek—uh, Moishe—Goldner." I remembered the man's dislike for the Polish adaptation of our identical surname.

"Little Goldner, it's really you?" the shopkeeper cried ecstatically, clutching one hand to his chest. "Thanks to God someone else from our group got away."

Ten minutes later, our clothes still damp, we scurried into the woods, talking softly but urgently. We marveled at the ease of both our escapes (like me, Rycz had simply walked away). We shared our mutual guilt and sorrow that the rest of our families were, as far as we knew, still in German hands.

I told the shopkeeper about what I had seen at the railroad station—the women shoved into cattle cars—and together we cried for our loved ones, for our own loss of freedom and dignity.

"I didn't see your wife or daughters," I told him, once we were settled in

the forest and certain we were alone. “But I am sure they were on the train. There were many cars. Maybe we’ll figure out where they’ve been relocated.”

Rycz grew angry. He peeled a loose piece of bark from the birch tree behind his back, and crumbled it between his fingers. “‘Relocation’ is their German term. It suggests a new home in a new place. I don’t think where they are going will be much of a home.”

“What are you saying?” I asked, trying to comprehend the meaning of his statement. “That they will be—”

“I’m saying that where the Germans are taking them—” Rycz stopped abruptly, looked at me, then apparently decided to choose his words more carefully. I think he said not what he undoubtedly suspected in his troubled heart, but what he felt I needed to hear.

“I’m saying it may be a long war. We’ll try to survive, and pray they will do the same so we can all be together again. But you have to understand nothing is certain. Nothing ever was.”

Rycz turned away, put his head in his hands, and sobbed quietly. He had, I would come to realize, become increasingly aware of his own frailties. He was not a young man. He did not have the strength—or drawing from a deeper well, the desire—to continue hiding and foraging for food like an animal. Had he not run into me, in fact, he might have already gone through with a plan to give himself up. But coming upon the frightened son of his friend and neighbor—I was just six years younger than his own precious youngest daughter—well, that changed everything. It was *besherit*. Fate. He knew how much I would need him. And for a while, anyway, that would be enough to supplant the guilt that haunted him every moment: the fact that he was alive and unfettered, while his wife and daughters were ... God only knew.

“We’ve got to figure a way to get some warmer clothes,” Rycz said late the next afternoon, after we slept away hours of daylight curled up on our mossy bed deep within the birch forest. The weather was already turning chilly, and neither one of us had so much as a jacket.

I had been thinking the same thing. I wished Mama were there with us. She would know what to do.

Rycz wrung his hands. It was a habit he had, I noticed, whenever he looked back on things he could not change.

“To think that just a few months ago, I owned a store filled with most everything we need. But the shelves are empty now. They must have been cleaned out within hours of our leaving. All I know is, when I crept back into town after escaping from Sedziszow, everything was gone. Everything. Even the *mezuzah* on my door, can you imagine?”

I thought about how I found my own home in shambles, and nodded. Then something occurred to me, triggered by Rycz’s words, and I brightened.

“There’s another store in the village. I went in there once.” I actually smiled a little at the memory it brought back, but I pushed it away. Another time.

“Yes, Krakowski’s place.” Rycz snickered. “Our good neighbors will miss their Jew when they beg to buy on credit from *that* son-of-a-bitch.”

“Does he sell clothes? Food?”

“Yes, but—”

“Then tonight, let’s show him what it’s like to offer credit to the needy. Of course, we won’t exactly *ask* him...

Moishe Rycz raised his eyebrows so high, they almost touched where his hairline used to be. “You’re proposing to break into the store like bandits, like ... like that *gonif* Babik would do?” (Do not worry, I did not reference the man when I told him of the incident, although I think he would have taken some pride in it).

I was on my feet now, agitated and alive. For the first time since being on my own, I knew what needed to be done. Now I had to convince Rycz. Who would know better how to break into a store, I reasoned, than another store owner?

“With all due respect,” I calmly insisted, “we need warm clothes. And in that store is where we’ll find warm clothes. You said so yourself. Is it any different than stealing food from the fields?”

Rycz began to argue that breaking and entering was somehow different than digging up a few vegetables, yet he surely knew we needed clothes just as much as nourishment to survive. If our meeting was fate, I argued back, was it not his moral responsibility to help me make it through the coming winter?

“I suppose you’re right,” Rycz finally said, with reluctance in his voice. He looked down at his flimsy shirt, fingered the thin material. “And it’s true we’ll freeze to death before long if we wear only these *shmatas*. Still, breaking into a business, with the owner right next door, is a lot riskier than plucking tomatoes off a vine.” He paused a moment. “Let’s wait till tomorrow night to do the deed. We need to think this through.”

I thought, *Maybe Mama is looking over my shoulder after all.*

Then the two of us crouched down, as Rycz shrugged off one moral concern for a bigger issue: figuring out how we might steal the things we would need to stay alive a while longer.

It was well after midnight on the following day when we headed for Straszecin’s last remaining store. Rycz carried a short branch and large sheet of burlap, neatly folded, which had been used at a nearby farm to hold potatoes. I carried a thin, rigid wire, about three feet long, that I had found near the river several weeks earlier. It was one of those finds you can’t imagine a use for at the time,

but you hang on to it, because something in the back of your mind says, well, you never know. Rycz was delighted when I showed it to him; with any luck at all, it would be a perfect tool for the job we had to do.

The night was mostly cloudy, and the relative darkness worked to our advantage as we slipped among the shadows, zigzagging through fields, keeping as far back as possible from houses in the village. In farm communities like Straszecin, it was not likely anyone would be up this time of night. Still, all it would take is one barking dog to alert a homeowner that something was amiss. Then, there was the always possibility of an encounter with German soldiers. Not probable at night in a rural village such as ours was, but...

We arrived at the little store without incident. Darkness continued to close in all around, except for a faint luster above, where moonlight tried to penetrate a thin layer of clouds. The store, although badly in need of repair on the outside, was much like Rycz's place had been, in both size and layout. In fact, years ago, Krakowski himself made no secret of the fact that he had modeled his place after Rycz's store, with the exception of pharmacy items.

"We've got everything he's got, except the Jew" Krakowski was fond of saying, although Rycz's business, if I am not mistaken, had clearly been the more successful of the two.

As Rycz expected, the door was securely bolted. But the window was another matter. The bottom sill was about six feet off the ground, and the frame was hinged on the top so it could swing out from the bottom. Only two hooks and eyelets on the inside held it shut, and if there were enough give...

Rycz hoisted me up on his shoulders. It took all his strength, but by this time I weighed next to nothing. Besides, what choice was there? For the next few moments, I worked my wire in between the sash and the casement, grateful that the eyelet must have loosened a bit over time, bending enough so that the hook

was not holding the window frame tightly against the casement. Finally, the wire slipped all the way through.

Working quickly, I maneuvered the wire upward and at a slight angle until it touched against the straight piece of the hook. With a series of short jerky motions, I tapped the wire up and against the hook until, finally, it was knocked out of the eyelet. With the first hook unlatched, the window gave even more, making removal of the other hook much easier. My heart pounding, I slipped through the open window and into the store.

For a moment, I panicked. It was so dark inside, I was afraid I might not find my way to the door without sending who-knew-what clattering to the floor. Gradually my eyes began to adjust. Moving tentatively, I found the door and slid back the bolt for Rycz to enter.

"It's too dark to find what we need," I whispered with alarm.

"Well, we're not going to compare sizes and colors, that is for certain, but I can pretty much figure out where everything is. But just to be sure, let's see if I can find..."

Rycz mumbled something else, then groped his way to the main counter, walked behind it, and ran his fingers over the shelves beneath.

"There," he said, under his breath. "Same place I keep them."

I had no idea what he was talking about until I heard a scratch and a whoosh, immediately followed by the distinct smell of sulfur. The match in Moishe Rycz's hand flared and illuminated part of the room. With his free hand Rycz grabbed several more packages of matches and stuffed them in his pocket. Then he quickly headed down the aisle toward the shelves of clothing, what little there was. I followed close behind as the match burned down to Rycz's fingertips. Suddenly the room was in darkness again.

"We take no more chances," Rycz said in a hushed voice, as he unfolded

the burlap. "The rest we do in the dark."

Relying on touch, guesswork, and visual memory from that last instant before the match burned out, we stacked two warm shirts, pairs of pants, and blankets into the burlap, which we then folded over and hastily knotted around the branch Rycz had carried in. *Like a couple of gypsies*, I thought. Then we each grabbed a heavy, lined jacket from a rack just to our left, and put them on over our own reeking clothes. The jacket I took was too big, but there was no time to look for something else.

As we groped our way toward the entrance, I thought I saw food of some kind—sausages, perhaps, or smoked hams—stacked on a table as I passed. I reached over to take one, but my arm accidentally bumped against a display of kerosene lamps, which fell clattering to the ground, their glass chimneys shattering as soundly as if I had set off an alarm.

"Damn!" I cursed.

We ran, Rycz and I, for the open door and out into the still-empty street. Looking over my shoulder, I saw the flickering of a lamp that had just been lit in Krakowski's room behind the store.

Rycz couldn't run as fast as me, so he handed over the bundle of clothes to lighten his load. We heard shouting behind us: Krakowski, most likely, screaming like a madman. Rycz was breathing hard as we reached the first of two fields we would have to cross before entering the protective forest, but he kept going, on adrenaline or fear or maybe even a wicked sense of exhilaration at having succeeded at something that, until now, had been against his very nature.

No one followed us as we ran. After ten minutes, Rycz panted, "You go on. I need to rest a moment. I'm no spring chicken like you." He collapsed to the ground, gasping for air.

"We stick together," I said, sitting down next to him.

We sat in silence, and after a moment I asked, "Do you think Krakowski came out in time to recognize us?"

"If he did, he'll go to the Germans, that one, and they'll come searching. But it was dark, my guess is he figured we were just two more bandits. Either way, we don't go near that store again."

"You're the boss," I said.

Moishe Rycz sighed. "No, I'm just a miserable pharmacist and shopkeeper. And you, you're a confused, innocent boy. We're both without homes and families, both without much idea of how to survive the winter. Two tragic equals, wouldn't you say?"

Neither of us looked at one another. We both lay on the cold ground, the bundle of clothes beside us. For a brief second, the only sound was our breathing, rapid and labored, like machinery.

Then Rycz said, "I'll tell you something else, young Mr. Goldner. Two days ago I thought our chance meeting was a sign from above that I was destined to help you, keep you going. I'm not so sure anymore."

I gave him a puzzled look.

"I think maybe it was meant to be the other way around," said the shopkeeper.

"So, you were a thief even before you met me!" Babik chortled.

I had just finished telling him about how Rycz and I had robbed Krakowski's store, and he was grinning ear to ear.

"Serves the old bastard right," he went on. "My wife, she always bought from the Jew ... uh, from old man Rycz. We knew he would never cheat us."

I had to smile at the idea of a lifelong bandit who worried about being cheated, but I kept that observation to myself.

"It is hard for me to believe that happened only a year ago," I told him. "We broke into the store just before last winter hit. It came early, if you remember, just like the winter before it. Getting through this present winter with you has been easy, so far, compared to what life was like when Rycz and I were on our own."

Babik merely grunted, then took another pull from his vodka bottle. My thoughts went back to that previous winter, and I wondered how I ever made it this far.

That early winter of 1941-42 had farmers scrambling to harvest whatever they could, storing away what little the Germans let them keep for the bleak months to come. To get at some of this food, we had to break into root cellars and other storage areas, which we became increasingly adept at doing. But this was far more dangerous than raiding fields, and it required us to expand our area of operation.

As the days grew colder, we often slept in depressions or among tree roots. Sometimes, we had to create our own nest, digging with our bare hands. We covered the cold earth with straw or moss or bark, then laid on it and covered ourselves with the blankets from Krakowski's store. At night, before prowling for food, we buried their blankets and covered up our hiding place. Often we changed locations, moving to another area of the forest or to other forests altogether, to throw off any trackers. We came to know the woods around Straszecin and along the banks of the Wisloka well.

By early December, the temperatures plummeted so that even our new jackets and blankets were not warm enough. Like field mice, we scurried toward the nearest dairy barn, where we moved in with the cows. We found them to be fine company and quite accepting.

Actually, there were two dairy farms in the immediate area. The church farm, where Mama bought milk to sell in Debica, was just south of Straszecin, over the bridge, along the road to Grabiny. But a bigger farm, with perhaps a hundred head of cattle, was also quite near to where we and the Ryczs once lived. Along with expansive fields that stretched east nearly all the way to the Wisloka River, it was part of the vast holdings of the area's largest landowner, an Austrian baron named Stubenphol.

The farm was next to a fenced-off area where Stubenphol lived in a grand house with his wife and two daughters. As I mentioned before, everyone in the village called it "the palace."

Poland had long been a feudal society, and while everyone in Straszecin envied Stubenphol, with his conspicuous procession of motor cars that paraded in and out of his gated compound, it could never be said we disliked him. The Baron seldom mixed with us peasants—he was clearly a man of position and breeding, with fine expensive clothes and (we assumed) refined tastes—but he was always courteous to those of us he passed.

It was in this barn, to begin with, where Rycz and I would often escape from the cold. We would creep in while everyone was asleep. We found the stalls comfortably warm as we pressed in close to our indiscriminating bovine companions. Plus, there was welcome nourishment under our feet. We groveled for it beside the cows like animals ourselves. We were reduced to this: getting on our hands and knees, crawling over clumps of manure to hungrily devour whatever feed lay on the floor: wheat mill feeds, dried beet pulp, and fermented silage of indeterminate origins—an acquired taste, I must say.

"A year ago, who'd have guessed we'd be stealing food away from a bunch of cows?" Rycz observed.

I sifted through the slop on the floor, looking for anything remotely

edible. "At least we're not grazing on their hay."

"It may come to that yet, my young friend. The winter has just begun."

About an hour before dawn, before the farmers arrived like clockwork to milk the cows, we took the first sample of the morning milk supply for ourselves. At first we lay beneath the cows and squeezed the milk directly into our mouths from their udders. But after a time we supped like gentlemen, drinking from a small metal container which someone had discarded.

Before fleeing out into the early morning frost, we would try to conceal all evidence of our presence. But we always worried that we might have overlooked some telltale sign that would give us away.

One December morning the temperature hovered near zero, so we opted not to leave the barn at all. After gorging ourselves on fresh milk, we climbed the ladder to the hayloft that overlooked the stalls. There we burrowed deep into the dried stalks, where we dozed lightly throughout the day, undisturbed.

The barn brought back warm memories to me: images of my mother whom I missed so much; of the times I accompanied her each morning to buy milk from the priest. That was, I had to admit, the happiest period of my entire childhood, the experience I treasured above all others. I thought about those days often, reliving each halcyon moment as if I were back at Mama's side.

The reverie is always the same: I'm eleven years old, sitting next to my mother on the narrow bench at the front of our small two-wheel cart. I hold the reins, grinning proudly, feeling very grown up and in full command of the horse that's steadily pulling us forward.

On the cart behind us are two large canisters made of white porcelain. One has just been filled with milk, while the other remains empty, for the moment. It jostles noisily as the cart bounces over the dirt road. The sky had begun to

lighten just before we left home; now the sun is a sliver of melon above the horizon. My favorite time of day.

"Are you cold?" Mama asks.

"No, I'm fine, really," I reply.

I am wearing a light jacket, but the morning air is brisk. I hardly notice the chill, though, because I hold the reins, and the thrill of driving the wagon has not worn off, even though I have been helping my mother for more than two months.

"I'm lucky to have a strong son who doesn't mind getting up so early," Mama is saying.

She has been awake since 4:30 a.m., guided by some internal clock that is always more reliable than the crow of Straszecin's roosters which follow, depending on the sunrise, some time later. She wakes me at 5:00—there are still several hours until I have to be at school—but she lets my sister sleep. Gita does not share my interest in driving the cart, and besides, with me out of the house, she has a few moments of privacy to get ready for school.

My grin widens at Mama's compliment. She and I have grown close, for these mornings have given us more time together. I know she has a tough life, peddling milk each weekday morning, returning home in the afternoon to care for the household, while Papa is on the road. I am happy to help, especially when it includes driving the horse cart.

"Can I drive the cart all the way into Debica with you today?" I ask.

"You don't have school?"

"Yes, but—"

"Next time there's a school break. Then you can go with me and watch the horse while I make my deliveries in the city. You'll be a big help. But I won't have you missing classes."

I sigh deeply. It's the answer I expected.

Mama has standing orders in Debica, regular customers who buy from her every day. The filled pail on the cart holds the milk she has just taken from our own cows. It will be sold to her Jewish customers, for the milk is considered kosher, coming from a Jewish-owned farm.

At this moment we are on our way to the priest's farm which adjoins the Straszecin church. Here Mama will buy milk to sell to her gentile customers. I cannot imagine what makes our cows Jewish—they look just like our neighbors' cows, and the priest's cows, for that matter. Friesians, they are, part black, part white. But then, I have always been told that I do not look Jewish either, which proves to me that you cannot often see any difference among people any more than you can among cows.

It is a 10-minute ride from our house to the church farm. When we arrive, I help fill the empty canister with the pails of fresh milk that have been set aside for Mama. Then, heading back toward home, I again take the reins. The horse snorts, as if to complain about the heavier load, and I imagine myself as a heroic officer in the brave Polish Cavalry, heading off to fight the Russians or the Germans or the Austrians or whoever Poland's enemy happens to be at the moment.

And I am still smiling as I hand Mama the reins and jump down off the seat, a block from our house where the road forks to the right. With a wave of her hand and a warm smile, Mama wishes me a good day at school.

"Tell Gita that I haven't forgotten she wants me to lengthen her blue dress. I'll do it when I get back," Mama calls as an afterthought.

And I think, she never has a moment for herself, my poor Mama, and I watch for a few moments as she guides the horse cart down the road toward Debica, until she becomes a speck in the distance and I lose her in the intensity of the blinding sun.

For days, Moishe Rycz and I repeated the routine: down with the cows at night, up in the hayloft during the day. Several times that week workers came up to pitch down new hay, but the loft was big; when Rycz and I heard the heavy footsteps on the ladder, we lay still, hidden well to the back, against the wall.

But not all footsteps were so clearly announced. On our fifth or sixth consecutive day in the barn, we were sleeping deep within the insulating blanket of hay. All I knew was that one second, I was back with my family in our little house a few blocks away (a dream? Had to be), and in the next instant I was aware of a flash of steel—a bayonet, it came to me—piercing through the hay just inches away from my left foot. Resisting an almost reflexive urge to scream and roll out of the way, I froze with fright, my heart pounding so loudly I was sure it could be heard echoing throughout the barn. Rycz lay a few feet over—the man liked to hide next to the outside opening, so he could look out onto the street below—and thankfully, he also remained completely still.

Now came a second thrust of the bayonet, then a third, haphazardly slicing through the deep pile of hay, each narrowly missing the two human forms who lay hidden beneath. It was as if we were protected by an invisible shield.

“Nothing here,” were the only words that I heard, shouted by a German soldier just inches away as he called out to his two *Wehrmacht* companions who were searching below.

Holding my breath, I took in the sounds that followed: sturdy boots, heading back down the wooden ladder. A moment later, laughter, drifting up from the ground below. Voices, receding into the distance. In German, something about “at least there’s no Jew blood to clean off our fine German steel.”

I thought I was going to vomit.

“The bastards were tipped off we were hiding here,” whispered my

companion after he saw the Germans saunter off.

"Who would have done that?" I asked, my heart still pounding and my body trembling as if it would never stop.

While most anyone could have alerted the Germans, Rycz insisted he knew. With a dismissive wave of his hand, he spat out, "Stubenphol, who do you think? He's one of *them*, wouldn't you guess?

"Not necessarily."

Rycz looked outside once more, saw nothing. He popped up from beneath the bed of hay, sitting upright. Several pieces of the dried grass remained in his hair, making him look like a scarecrow, I thought. He continued talking, his contempt evident.

"Before we were taken, Stubenphol was cozying up to the Germans like crazy. Everyone noticed the soldiers, the SS in particular, coming and going from the 'Palace.' Beer parties, orgies, who knows what the hell they were doing. Just good old Germans being Germans."

"Austrian," I corrected.

"What?"

"Stubenphol is Austrian. That's what I was told."

"Austrian, German, what's the difference? You mark my words, they're all Nazis, every one of those bastards."

"If they knew we were here, they didn't try very hard to find us." I was obviously not convinced that the Baron knew about us, or gave us up. "A little more effort, a couple more stabs with those bayonets, and we'd both be dead now."

"Enough talk," said the shopkeeper. "We're not going to spend another day here. Not for a long while."

We moved to the church farm. For the time being, we assumed, it had to

be safer. There we found silage and shelter just as we did in Stubenphol's barn.

And when I realized my birthday was less than a month away, it occurred to me that turning 16 would not be the milestone that I once had envisioned. There would be no birthday hugs, no birthday surprises.

Little did I know.

Babik was growing restless and beginning to yawn, either from my stories or from the vodka. Probably both.

"You think you had it so tough, kid? While you was picking cow shit off the rotting animal feed, I was in a place where..." He stopped abruptly.

"Where?" I asked, knowing full well, hoping to hear him talk about the concentration camp and his escape. I wondered if my mother and sister were in the same place, if maybe they might have tried to escaped as well.

He fixed me with as firm a gaze as the vodka would allow. "You don't need to know nothing more about me. Just forget it." Then he brightened a little. "But what I don't understand is, when does your father come into the picture? That was your father who was with you when I found you at the Grabiny station, no?"

Papa. Tears began to form, but I fought them back. "I was just getting to that part," I said.

It was one of those rare winter days when the temperature had moderated and the skies had turned partly cloudy. If you listened carefully, you could hear the call of the hardy winter buntings as they hopped from branch to branch. For a Polish winter, this was as good as it got.

Moishe Rycz and I had taken advantage of the break in the weather to stay away from the nearby barns and keep to the forest. We had even stockpiled enough food to last a couple days. And we found a great place to settle in for a

while, behind the protective trunks of two venerable old pines, which had nearly grown together, allowing just a fine streak of daylight to penetrate between them.

I might have been daydreaming, who knows, but the sudden snap of a nearby twig heightened my senses to full alert. Someone was approaching with slow, stealthy movements. Rycz heard it, too.

From where we sat, we saw nothing. It was late in the day. Twilight.

For a moment, silence. Then again: the crackle of brittle brush underfoot. Overhead, a pair of ravens took flight in a noisy duet of cawing.

Like a mole emerging from his burrow, Rycz warily peered out from behind the tree while I waited, hidden behind him, as if that would make a difference. After several moments, we saw a solitary man appear, dressed in torn, deteriorated clothing. The man was obviously chilled and weary, quite unaware, it seemed, of anyone's presence. Rycz emerged slowly, and the stranger froze in his tracks, not yet comprehending the vision before him.

At that same moment, a broad smile spread across the shopkeeper's face—the first time I had ever seen him smile.

"It's all right, Moniek," Rycz said, clasping his hands together. "It's more than all right. It's wonderful!"

I came out from behind the tree. At first, I did not recognize the bearded stranger before me. Then my heart began to pound wildly.

For the stranger who stood there, rigid as a statue, was my father.

"Papa, Papa, Papa!" I cried as I ran to him.

"Moniek, is it really you?" he gasped. "Dear God, is it possible?"

We embraced, and as we hugged, tears of joy mixed with tears of anguish. Rycz looked on compassionately, his own eyes filling up. He knew, I can say with certainty, that he would never be reunited with any members of his own family. Not in this life.

Through his tears, Papa whispered, “Shush, shush, *Moishele*. The forests have many ears, and sometimes as many guns. I know, I’ve been in hiding a long time.”

He hugged me again, not wanting to let go. Then, familiar words: “Let me look at you.”

I remembered my father saying the same thing when he returned home from the Russian territories, just a few months before the Germans came for us. *What did you come home to?* I wanted to ask. *Why didn’t you stay where you might have been safe?*

Leap held me at arm’s length, drinking me in, a wisp of a boy who still had grown no taller than five feet. I am sure I looked thinner than ever to him, but at least he could see I was alive and well. Eventually Papa’s gaze fell again upon the shopkeeper, and we hugged, the three of us.

“They killed them, Papa: *Bubbie* and *Zayde*, I saw the soldiers kill them, and I saw them put Mama and Gita in a boxcar and they took babies and...” I was nearly hysterical. The words came pouring out like raw sewage, bitter and rank.

“About my parents, I know,” Papa said. He choked back a sob. “I saw it, too. And moments later, I saw you walk away. It gave me the courage to do the same.”

“I should not have left you there, Papa. I should have stayed for you and Mama and Gita.” My body shook as I wept.

“Son, look at me.” My father put a finger under my chin, forcing my face upward. “You were right to escape. There was nothing you could do for Mama and your sister—may God have mercy—nothing you could do for me. Had you not walked away when you did...” Papa’s voice cracked with emotion. “What matters now is the fact we’re alive. And together. Oh, how I’ve prayed for this day.”

We huddled closely for a long while, bound in fear and despair, fragments of what had been two happy, loving families: a father and son, along with an aging neighbor.

Straszecin's last remaining Jews.

Throughout the remaining winter, we moved through the forests, staying within familiar areas. During daylight, we varied our hiding places, constantly on the lookout for German patrols.

"Don't think for a minute we're safe just because we're out of the village," Papa said. "If there are three of us, there must be others, and if there are others, you can be sure someone will try to kill—" he caught himself—"capture us."

"Why, Papa?" I asked, although I knew the answer. "What did we do?"

"They're after us because we're Jews."

It was a truth, I am certain, my father could not have imagined a few years earlier. Papa dropped his voice and said it again, as if it explained everything.

"Because we're Jews."

"Why did we have to be Jews, anyway? Why couldn't we be Catholics like everyone else in Straszecin?" I was crying angrily, no longer the courageous young man I had risen to become with Moishe Rycz. Papa was here now, Papa was supposed to make everything right.

Papa hugged me close to him, rocking back and forth. "We are what we are, *Moishele*. We can't change it, anymore than we can change what's happening all around us. The best we can do is endure it, one day at a time. What will be, will be."

It was a fatalistic answer that I found unsettling, but at that moment, I was not sure why.

Meanwhile, we three fugitives were each learning something new about

survival from each other, and our pooled experiences made us collectively stronger. Papa might have frozen to death if not for the clothes Rycz and I had stolen from Krakowski's store. We had no extra jacket for him, so he used a blanket as a wrap, and it made all the difference. Papa, in return, introduced us to a few of his hiding places—an unlocked potato cellar, for one, and a barn much farther away than Rycz and I had ventured—giving us more places to hide.

For the time being, we continued to avoid the Baron's large dairy barn. But when Papa heard the story of my near discovery there by *Wehrmacht* soldiers, he—like me—was not convinced that Stubenphol either knew or cared about our visits.

What none of us knew—and Rycz would never have believed it, anyway—was something I only learned many years later: that Stubenphol had suspected early on that Jews were hiding on his grounds. He did nothing to discourage it. Although an Austrian national, he had no love for the Nazi party. He used his camaraderie with German officers (developed during frequent drinking encounters at his estate) to glean intelligence information. Then he passed it on to the partisan groups that were beginning to form.

Rycz, however, remained steadfast in his conviction. No Austrian could be trusted.

And by the end of that March, the shopkeeper had slipped even deeper into depression. He ran a constant fever. Fluid began collecting in his lungs, from what he told us, making breathing difficult. He was also having trouble walking. Each day, the pain—both physical and mental—seemed to worsen.

"I've made a decision," he announced early one morning to Papa and me.

We were in the church barn, crawling around like pigs, grabbing whatever rotted animal feed we could locate. Rycz pulled off pieces of cow dung that were clinging to his pants, and stood up.

"I'm through running, living like an animal—worse than an animal. I can't keep hiding this way anymore. And you don't need a pathetic old man to slow you down or share your food."

"That's nonsense," Papa said. "More than that, it's suicide."

"Think what you're saying!" I cried.

Rycz merely sighed. "What's the point of staying alive when I have nothing to live for?"

Papa tried to reason with him. "Perhaps it won't be a long war, we have no way of knowing. What if our wives, our daughters, are still alive? What if *they're* fighting to survive in order to be reunited with *us*? Look, I'm a firm believer that whatever happens, will happen. But I think it's our duty to our families and ourselves—our *moral* duty, really—to at least make it difficult for those Nazi bastards."

Rycz, suddenly seized with another violent fit of coughing, was not moved. "Time has ended for me. I've lost all hope."

Papa shook his head sadly. "Perhaps you'll feel differently in the light of day" was all he could say.

But the next day, while Papa and I slept uneasily in a freshly-dug *ziemlanki*—a camouflaged underground bunker we had hollowed out in the forest soil—Rycz must have quietly risen, left his jacket for Papa to find, and without looking back, stoically headed in the direction of the small village where he had lived, like us Goldners, for so many years.

And over the months ahead, I would come to visualize the resignation of Moishe Rycz, my friend, almost as if I had walked away with him:

Rycz is moving slowly, painfully, with his head high, feeling not fear but a calm sense of renewed determination. The shopkeeper is no longer taking care to move silently, not this time, not anymore, because he is finally able to say to hell

with the Germans, to hell with the madness all around. He is simply going back to where he had made his living, in the little store by the bridge; back to the living quarters where he had conceived and raised his three daughters, where his wife was always fussing to keep the modest place neat and attractive. It isn't the Stubenphol "palace" that stands behind the fence across the road, but it is his palace. He had lost sight of that fact over the past six months, but clearly he knows it now.

As Rycz walks, the sky is turning lighter toward the east, but he pays it no attention, any more than he notices the acrid burning smell in the air, blowing in his direction from somewhere up ahead. All his senses are focused on a single goal, his meager strength marshaled for one desperate purpose: to be free and safe, back in Straszecin where he belongs, where his destiny lies.

Oh, the shopkeeper sees it all so clearly now. This is not an act of resignation, or of suicide; rather, it's a beginning, the embracing of all life's blessings. Soon, he won't need memories to fall back on, or fear to propel him forward. Soon, he'll be home. And surely, if there's still a God in heaven, everyone will welcome him back, with tears of joy and with open arms.

Surely.

How do you judge another man's actions? How do you understand what motivates someone to do what you never could?

I struggled with these questions throughout that second spring of my vagabond existence. I was deeply troubled by the loss of my former neighbor, who for a few arduous months had been the most important person in my life.

"Don't be angry with him, son," said Papa. "For him, the pain of living had become intolerable."

I listened, but did not respond. My father continued, "Look, I meant it

when I said we must trust in fate. Fate led me to you, after all. And—who knows?—it could lead us both to Mama and Gita, there's always a chance. Rycz didn't see things that way. He—" his voice faltered, then he changed what he was going to say. "I only hope that however the end came, it was fast, and may he rest in peace."

I was still not comfortable with my father's philosophy, and I continued to despair over Moishe Rycz's resignation. But I vowed, after further thought, that I would not judge Rycz. I had no right.

With the thaw, Papa and I stayed in the forests, for the weather was tolerable and Papa felt it was too risky to stay in the barns at night. Already, a heavy lock had tightly secured the church barn, a clear indication that our raids had been discovered. But our stomachs growled with hunger, and Papa thought about our former next door neighbor. I had told Papa how Regula had helped me months before. It was time to beg favors once more.

After nightfall, we skulked past our former home. It remained dark and empty. We tapped lightly on Regula's window.

It was heartening to see our former neighbor cry with joy to see us. He also grieved with what appeared to be genuine despair as to the uncertain fate of Mama and Gita.

But he did not invite us to come in.

I wondered briefly about Anna, then realized my cherished memories were firmly fixed in another time and place. Now, I realized, I had no feelings for anyone. Except Papa, to whom I felt closer than at any previous time in my life.

"Can you give us some bread?" my father finally stammered. "Something to take with us into the forests? We wouldn't come here if we weren't desperate."

Regula looked out at our two expectant faces. He wiped his eyes with the back of his hand, then wiped his hand on his pants. "Yes, of course. I'll give you

what I can," he said in almost a whisper. "But you must not come back here. For myself, I'm not afraid, but there are others living here with us now, through no choice of ours. For a while, they used your place, but the stove is gone..."

I knew well, having looked inside after fleeing Sedziszow. I wondered if my father had been back there before, and how many times.

"I don't trust these people," Regula continued. "I think they'd turn you in. And the Germans, they're watching more closely. They come through the village all the time now. You must believe me, my friends."

"That I do," Papa responded grimly, and maybe he meant it. But I was cynical. I could not help wondering if it was just a convenient excuse.

Regula gave us bread, two cooked potatoes, and a chunk of kielbasa. "I know you don't eat pork," he said considerately, "but it's all I have to give you."

Papa stared at the *traif*—the Yiddish word for any food, like pork, that is not kosher—and sighed. "When one is hungry enough ... well, God will understand."

"He will," Regula whispered. "And He will protect you. Be safe, my friends."

In tears, he closed the window on Papa and me. I wondered if Regula still looked upon me as the boy who once took pleasure in everything, even the hard labor of plowing his field. Now my eyes had grown cold. And my disbelief in Regula's words must have been clearly evident to him.

Those tears in his eyes? Looking back, it was possible, I suppose, that sending Papa and me away simply broke the man's heart.

Back in the forest, we ate part of the food Regula gave us, determined to save the rest for the next day. The baked potato was a special treat—for the past year, every potato we had eaten had been raw. It fired Papa with a new resolve.

“We’re not going to sit here and starve while we wait for the crops to grow in the fields,” he told me as I licked the last bit of tender potato off my fingers. “There are hares in the forests and fields and there are chickens in nearly every home and barnyard. There’s food all around if we’re willing to risk cooking it.”

I popped a piece of the once-forbidden kielbasa into my mouth, forcing myself to savor it as if it were a prime cut of Uncle Isaac’s kosher beef.

“What about all the smoke?” I asked

Papa had given this some thought. “We’ll have to experiment with different types of fuel. Maybe dried peat or bark or moss, whatever we can find that will burn. But it’s still risky, because smoke or no smoke, even darkness won’t cover up the scent of cooking meat.”

Two nights later, our food ran out. I picked a yard at random on the edge of the village and grabbed a hen, wringing its neck almost immediately to end the squawking. I was surprised by how easy it was, even though I had never before killed anything with my bare hands. Soon a great commotion arose from the other residents of the coop. I ran as fast as I could with my hand still tightly wrapped around our dinner’s contorted neck.

Papa gutted the hen using a sharp piece of metal we had scavenged in another yard. Then I plucked the animal while my father dug a deep pit with a stolen shovel. He filled the pit with branches, then started a fire using far too many of our few dry matches. The damp winter wood created smoke, which rose and bobbed in the night wind, drifting steadily toward the east. Rigging a kind of spit with other pieces of metal we had gathered, we put the hen over the fire, then scurried away, heading a considerable distance to the southwest. There we hid while our food cooked, alert to the possibility that the smoke and aroma wafting from the forest might bring unwanted company.

After an hour, we crept back to the pit and dined on fresh-cooked chicken.

We almost cried with joy as the warm *shmaltz*—chicken fat—ran down our chins, the crisp skin and tender meat reminding us of days long gone. With great difficulty, we put half the chicken in our pockets, to be enjoyed another day. Then we covered over the pit so it would not be discovered.

In this same way we cooked not only chicken, but wild hares (which I learned to catch and skin with some aplomb), potatoes, beets—whatever we could find or steal—sometimes once or even twice a week throughout the summer of 1942. When the matches ran out, we started fires by rubbing rocks together. Always, we left the immediate vicinity while our food cooked. Twice, when we came back and peered through the trees, we found that our fire had been discovered by a patrol of German soldiers, probably alerted by the smell. Both times, we ran off undetected, forgoing the day's meal.

With the warm weather and frequent rains (which always left Papa and I muddy and miserable), the fields again became green and the grain grew tall, providing us with alternative hiding places. But because the farmers now had an immense quota to fill and harsh—usually fatal—penalties if they fell short, they did not react kindly to having their fields raided. As a result, we found it much more difficult to pilfer fruit and vegetables than we did the summer before.

In our nocturnal raids, Papa and I had taken to carrying a heavy iron bar in case we needed to defend ourselves, for on several occasions we had spotted Poles patrolling their fields at night. The bars were thick and rounded, about four feet long, dismantled from a piece of harvesting equipment we found in an unlocked shed. The heavy bars gave us a small added sense of security, although they would be no match, of course, for a bullet.

It was on an uncomfortable August night that we decided to raid a field near Czarna. This particular field was one of our favorites because it backed onto a forest and the Pole who owned it lived far to the other side. Also, it was large

enough to provide a full buffet of choices, including the plumpest, juiciest tomatoes Papa and I had ever tasted.

We found such good pickings that night, we made a point to come back again the next evening. Creeping out of the dense forest, we crouched among the juniper that filled in the short distance between woods and field. The moon was waning, but there were few clouds to block the faint light that splashed ethereally over the ground in front of us. The air was stagnant and the humidity uncomfortably high. At first cautiously, then more brazenly, Papa and I headed for the tomato vines.

We were nearly there, ready to claim our prizes, when a loud rustling came from the wheat field to our right. Emerging from the willowy stalks were two tall figures. They came toward us at a dead run, screaming and cursing in Polish.

Farmers, not Germans, I realized with some relief. The figures were approaching quickly, brandishing their weapons high in the air. Not guns, luckily. Scythes.

"Should we run, Papa?" I asked. I had the foresight to speak in Polish rather than Yiddish. No need to advertise that we were Jews.

"No time," my father responded, also in Polish, and he was right. The Poles, simply trying to protect what was theirs, were upon us.

The combat was one on one: man against man, man against boy. And it was over rather quickly.

While Papa and his attacker went at each other, iron bar to scythe, my assailant wildly swung his scythe in a wide arc at me. I easily dodged the sharp blade and darted left, behind the big man. The Pole turned to his left, preparing to sweep his blade into me as he came around, but I pivoted, changed direction, and now came back around the man's right side. Summoning all my strength, I

swung my metal bar and slammed it into the man's right kneecap. The grisly crunch of shattered bone was almost as loud as the piercing scream that followed. The Pole crumbled to the ground.

I ran to help my father, but the second Pole, hearing the shrieks of his fallen partner and seeing himself outnumbered two to one, dropped his scythe, turned, and—with a scream of his own—ran off back into the wheat field. Meanwhile, the injured farmer continued to writhe and scream in agony.

There was urgency in Papa's voice. "Let's get out of here. Others will be coming soon."

I walked over to the injured man, who was now retching uncontrollably. "I am not the enemy," I said, in what I thought was a calm, even voice.

The man looked up at me, his eyes intense with pain, loathing, perhaps disbelief as well.

Then Papa and I vanished into the night.

Babik had fallen asleep before I got to the events leading up to my father's death at the Grabiny station, and I resolved that one day soon, he would know. I did not think for a minute that I would live through the war to tell the story. But *someone* had to know what happened to my poor Papa and me on that day, even if that someone was a hard man like Jan Babik.

In the meantime, there followed more semi-nightly drills in the German language. But a short time later, my teacher indicated he was anxious to move on, to do more with his life than wait out the war by tutoring a teenaged Jewish kid. And I, by this time, had mastered the language rather well.

So I was not surprised when late in June, the lessons abruptly stopped. When I asked Babik where the ex-Nazi had gone, he told me only that the man had been "reassigned." *By whom? To do what?*

“Never mind.”

Besides, Babik had more to think about than dealing with my persistent questions. His wife Stefania had missed their last assignation. Something was wrong.

7. *Close calls*

As if his escape from Auschwitz was not enough, Babik’s increased actions against the Germans, along with the fact that he was sheltering me, a Jew, made it far too dangerous for him to sneak back into Straszecin. The last time he had been home was in January, when he carried my wounded body in his arms. But at regular intervals, his wife Stefania had met him at pre-arranged places in the nearby forests, or—now that the wheat crop had matured to the stage where it was thick and tall—in one of several fields.

There was always the danger of being followed, so usually she came alone. But sometimes one or two of her children accompanied her. The eight-year-old, Anna, loved to come along, bringing food that her mother always prepared before the clandestine meetings.

I think Anna and her older siblings understood that their father had been captured in a roundup and had escaped, but her mother had aggrandized the man, telling her children he was a dedicated partisan, helping to free Poland. At least that was what I gleaned in my short talks with Anna on those few occasions when I was invited to the rendezvous. About his criminal background, I am fairly certain the children knew nothing. Their mother kept that fact from them, and from what I recalled from my younger days, the townspeople never spoke of it other than in hushed voices among themselves.

The children did know, of course, that I was hiding with their father, and several of them remembered when I was in their house for that short time, laid up like a wounded bird. Also, like I said, I did see Anna Babik on a few occasions when she came with her mother, but we had little in common to talk about, even when her parents left us alone in the forest for an hour or so while they went off to ... well, you can imagine.

After a time, I became aware that during these trysts, Babik was turning over money and other goods he received from his robberies—*our* robberies. But often, the man seemed to hand over far more plunder than I ever saw during our holdups. *Where did it come from?* I wondered, still not grasping the fact that Babik had, in fact, used the war to his advantage.

He had become a mercenary.

His wife, in return, was bringing not only home-cooked food, but also the latest war news and local gossip. She often had intelligence information for her husband as well, including news about German activity in the area; as I have now concluded, her wealthy employer must have invaluable in that respect. I could be wrong, but I always assumed Stubenphol feared the bandit like everyone else did. Perhaps that is why he employed Stefania as a maid for a few *zlotys* a week and passed on information to her from time to time. Maybe it was to insure that he remained in Babik's good graces.

But it was a two-way street. My new mentor was also getting regular information of his own, and passing it on to his wife. The Babiks' most recent meeting together, sometime late in June, had been a good case-in-point. I overheard part of their conversation as Babik briefed his wife on recent setbacks for "Stach" and "Kruk."

"Stach" and his squad—now with 25 members—had destroyed train tracks between Ropczyce and Sedziszow, Babik told her. They were heading south

toward Podkarpacie, when—in a forest near Grojnica—they encountered Germans and Blue Police. The latter term referred to the blue-uniformed Polish auxiliary police. They were called the “Blue Police,” as I understand it, to avoid use of the word “Polish.” These *momzers* were intensely loyal to the Nazis, especially in the killing of Jews.

Although the unit killed three Germans and two policemen, “Stach” himself had sustained serious wounds so “Kruk” had taken over as temporary commander. On new instructions from a higher command, they reversed course and headed north, to the area around Tarnobrzeg, where they joined forces for a time with a group of Jewish partisans who had escaped from the Warsaw ghetto. (Jewish partisans! How I thrilled at the concept!)

Over the next month, according to Babik, the squad cut down telegraph poles, made a few attacks on railways, and destroyed at least two farms and a distillery, all of which had been taken over by Germans. In the distillery offensive alone, he said, the squad came upon more than 30,000 *zlotys*. But more recently, heading back toward their home base, the group met with disaster. They again encountered Blue Police, this time near Zabno, north of Tarnow. Nine squad members were killed.

“Lucky for me,” Babik told his wife, “‘Kruk’ wasn’t among the dead.”

“I’d be careful with that lot,” Stefania warned. “I don’t trust any of them. And don’t forget, we live in a Home Army stronghold. If they find out you’re associating with their rivals in the People’s Guard ... well, you’ve got enough enemies already.”

“Don’t *you* forget, you got eight children to feed. What little I can steal is nothing compared to what may come my way from ‘that lot,’ as you put it. Think of it, Stefania: they took 30,000 *zlotys* last month from just one Kraut-run business alone! Plus I hear there are Russian air drops, dropping cash and

weapons out of the goddamned sky. There's money in these forests, by Christ, and I'll get my hands on some of it."

"And what about the Jewish boy?" she asked, not hiding her disdain for me. "Here you are spending every moment with him, you who never spent any time with your own children."

Babik grew angry, but in front of his wife, his ire seemed controlled. "The boy will be important to help me get what I want," he said. "Even more than I thought at first. Already, 'Kruk' and the others are aware of him, of his courage. He's my ticket to bigger things. Would you expect me to put my own children in such danger?"

A chill ran through me as I strained to hear every word. I wondered how, exactly, I could be his "ticket to bigger things."

Then his wife said, "But your children are in danger, we all are. That's what I wanted to tell you. The Germans have been coming to the house more often now, sometimes daily, searching for you. They know you're hiding, and they want you. They want you bad."

I wondered if Babik had been tied to the murder of the two soldiers he told me about. Or had his past—his escape from Auschwitz, his robberies, his ties with partisan groups, his hiding of a Jewish boy—simply caught up with him?

Well, since I'm going to die anyway, this is how I want to do it, I reminded myself.

But that meeting had happened weeks before. It was July now, and Babik was growing anxious. Stefania had failed to show up at their appointed time and place.

"She hasn't missed a meeting before," he worried, looking in my direction but addressing no one in particular. "Either she felt she was being followed and turned back, or ..."

He didn't finish the sentence.

"Maybe German troops were moving through the village, maybe they were watching the house," I offered, "and to leave at that moment would have made your wife look suspicious."

"It's all possible," responded Babik, "but I got to make sure everything's all right at home. You might as well come with me, kid. Straszecin's your home, too," he added—thoughtlessly, I thought.

"Not anymore."

"Yeah." Babik paused. "Well, you coming anyway?"

"Mister, I'm safer with you than on my own."

"Who knows?" Babik countered. "Who the hell knows anything anymore?"

It was uncomfortably warm for so late in the day, but a breeze had risen from the west as we made our way to Straszecin, just under an hour's walk from our present location. Since I first began hiding in the woods, I had been exposed to sub-zero temperatures and sweltering heat, and I would take the heat any day. It would have been safer to wait until nightfall before setting out, but Babik was anxious. Besides, he figured the tall wheat would hide us much of the way.

Between us we carried a Russian submachine gun and two Lugers. We also had several grenades, safely hidden inside the lining of our filthy jackets, toward the bottom. We had torn the lining away on the top and sides, then re-pinned the sides back in place, to create a pouch. It was the only reason we wore jackets at all on such warm days.

Coming in from the south, we crossed the narrow Czarna River which emptied, a few kilometers further east, into the Wisloka. We heard German troops in the distance—laughter, dogs barking—so we moved carefully as we approached Babik's home. By the time we arrived, dusk had settled over the village.

With visible relief, Babik found his wife and their eight children safe and sound. He hugged them all, and I observed once again how this notorious thief, who killed and robbed long before the war made such actions somehow less detestable, had a soft spot where his family was concerned.

"You should not have come here," Stefania admonished. "The village is crawling with Germans."

"I got anxious when you didn't show up," he said. I tried to make myself invisible against a wall of the room. This was not easy. Children were everywhere.

Stefania was clearly upset. "If I left to meet you, I would have been followed. They're actively looking for you now, they know you been hiding in the area. I worry for you."

"I been hunted before," he said matter-of-factly.

Stefania gave him a severe look, then glanced over at me. "I think they also know you're hiding a Jew. And they're aware of what you two been up to."

Then her voice dropped, so her children wouldn't overhear. But I caught enough to piece it together.

"More than that, they know your background. I don't know if they connected you to Auschwitz, but I wouldn't put it past Stubenphol to turn you over to them. He talks to them all the time, you know. And he knows you—what you can do."

Jan Babik actually grinned at that remark.. Even criminals have egos, I realized.

"Now get away from here, both of you," Stefania urged. "The Germans come by every day, practically, and they haven't been here today."

As if on cue, her statement was followed by a pounding on the door.

In German: Open the door. Open at once!

The only way out was through that door or through the window next to it. Babik and I were trapped. We could open fire, but that would just attract more Germans, and mean certain death for Babik's entire family. It was Stefania who abruptly put a plan in motion.

"Quick," she said in a hushed voice, "under the bed!"

"What?" He didn't move. I was not sure, either.

Stefania pushed him with everything she had. I followed. "Unless you have a better idea," she whispered urgently, "get under the goddamn bed!"

There was one bed in the cramped Babik home. It was in a small separate room that formed the base of their L-shaped living space. This, of course, was used by Stefania, and Jan as well, on those occasions before the war when he was home. The children all slept on mats which they rolled out each evening into the main room.

In an instant, Babik and I dove under the bed. I slid beneath it easily, but Babik had a harder time squeezing his bulky body under the framework. The pounding on the door grew more insistent. In moments, I knew, they would break it down.

"I'm coming," Stefania yelled to the door. We heard some murmuring which followed. She was hurriedly passing on instructions to her three oldest children. They must have understood, for the older ones rounded up their remaining five siblings, including the infant, and all made a beeline for the bedroom where their father and I were hiding.

The mattress sagged, pressing deeply into Babik's bulk, as all eight kids sat down on the bed.

We listened breathlessly as Stefania opened the door.

I heard the sound of boot heels coming into the main room. I could practically visualize the SS officers: young, still in their twenties perhaps,

brownish-blond hair, deep-set blue eyes. Pushing past Stefania. Scanning the room.

"I told you, he isn't here. Haven't seen the bastard in months," came Stefania's voice.

One of the two men grunted, the other mumbled something in German we couldn't hear. The boot heel sound headed toward the bedroom. Above us, some of the younger children whimpered.

When they opening the bedroom door, the German sons-of-bitches must have been startled to see six children sitting in a row on the bed, their legs dangling off the side. The two other children—both toddlers, really—were apparently being held by the older kids. I hoped the children looked like sweet, innocent waifs as they stared curiously at the German officers.

From our limited view under the bed, I observed as Stefania nervously followed the officers to the doorway. She fixed her children with a calming gaze, perhaps mentally willing them not to do or say anything that might tip off the enemy.

After what seemed to be an eternity, but in reality lasted less than half a minute, the men turned to leave the room. Suddenly, the taller officer of the pair stopped, turned back toward the bed, and motioned to the children.

"Off!" he said. Then again, louder: "Off! Now!"

The older kids must have looked toward their mother, for I could see her nod grimly. What choice did they have? One after another, the children jumped off the bed and backed away.

As Stefania and her children looked on in terror, one officer unshouldered his rifle. His boots were inches from my face as he began probing the bed, thrusting his bayonet through the straw-filled mattress with sharp jabs. Babik and I held our breath. I had a sense of déjà vu—the barn all over again. I

wondered if my guardian was as frightened as I was.

As luck would have it, the bayonet's cold steel never pierced the mattress deeply enough to reach either Babik or me.

Why didn't the officers bother to look under the bed? I wondered then, and I wonder still. The answer is anyone's guess.

With a stern warning that they would return, the Germans sauntered off. And as the door closed behind them, Stefania—tough, callous Stefania—broke down in tears.

For the moment, her husband and children were safe. But this, they knew, was no occasion to celebrate. Sooner or later, luck just might run out. It was the possibility we all lived with every day.

Before Babik and I left to slink back to the forest, Stefania pulled her husband aside, and I overheard as she said, "Jan, it's bad enough you're being hunted for all the things you've done. But do you have to make matters worse by hiding the Jew, besides?"

He was clearly in no mood to argue. "Like I told you, he'll be as useful to me as I been to him," was all he said, skirting the complex motives he undoubtedly held for rescuing me in the first place—many of which, I believe, he was just beginning to understand himself. For I know now that his move toward me in Grabiny was an emotional one; it began before his mind began to rationalize more practical reasons for saving me and keeping me with him.

Then he added, as his wife merely shook her head, "Besides, with my plans for him in the months to come, you'll probably get your wish. Odds are the kid won't survive near as long as me."

The following day, with Babik and I already out of the district, the Germans paid a return visit to the home of Stefania Babik. This time, the two SS men from the

previous visit were accompanied by a third man, older and more severe in appearance, and it was he who did most of the talking. Surprisingly, in broken Polish.

This is how Stefania related the horrifying incident when she saw her husband and me months later:

“Your husband—where is he?” demanded the older officer after searching the house. This time, there was a careful check *under* the bed.

“As I’ve been telling these men,”—she pointed to the other two SS officers, who stood at attention behind the third—“I haven’t seen him in a long time. The bastard walked out on me and my children months ago, and if you find him, you’re welcome to him.”

It was the best performance she could muster, but it wasn’t convincing to the three Germans who must have suspected that Babik had come and gone right under their noses.

The older officer slapped her soundly across her face. She stepped back, trying to regain her composure. Reflexively, she put her hand up to her cheek. Several of her older children started to step forward to help her, or lunge at the officers, but they were quickly stopped in their tracks as the other two men leveled their rifles directly at them.

“I will ask you only one more time, you Polish whore,” the officer began. As he spoke, he calmly adjusted the glove on his right hand, which had become wrinkled after striking the woman’s face. “Where is your husband hiding with that Jew child? Or do you consider the Jew’s life more valuable than that of your own children?”

In truth, she didn’t know *where* we hid. The places where she met her husband from time to time were not places he would hide during the day. She could not reveal his whereabouts even if she wanted to. So it was with great poise

and equanimity, she believed, that she responded to the glaring visage of the German swine before her.

“I will tell you one more time, I don’t know.”

The officer raised his hand to strike her again, then thought better of it and lowered his arm. He turned instead to the two men who stood with their rifles still raised toward the horrified children.

“Take them out back and shoot them,” he sneered, speaking now in his native tongue.

“All of them?” asked one of the men, clearly startled.

“Of course, shoot them all,” he repeated. “We’ll give that Jew-loving Pollak criminal something to come home to.”

At gunpoint, Stefania and her eight children were marched outside. The sun showed no mercy as they were lined up against the wooden fence that separated their small patch of yard from the creek behind it. She held the infant in her arms. Her daughter Anna held on to the toddler. Some of the older kids wet themselves and released their bowels in fear. The younger ones weren’t sure what was happening, but they cried after seeing the fear in their other siblings.

As for Stefania, she told her husband she prayed silently, hoping it would be over quickly. I wondered if she wished she could tell them exactly where her husband was, in order to save her children. Perhaps she realized that information would offer no protection anyway.

A dog barked incessantly from somewhere in back. Her children wailed. Legions of small gnats flew around her eyes, her nose.

She waited to die with her children.

Both young officers raised their rifles, each taking sight on an opposite end of this human line, ready to work their way down the row of children and meet in the middle, as they awaited the order to fire.

It was slow in coming.

The older, ranking officer—the man who had ordered this execution—was suddenly involved in a hushed, animated discussion with a fourth German officer, a man of about the same age, with a more portly build.

A few moments later, the fourth man departed, and the ranking officer barked a command in German. Assuming it was the order to fire, Stefania squeezed her eyes closed and tightly hugged Anna, the child who cowered next to her.

There was no sound of gunfire.

She opened her eyes, saw the two riflemen shouldering their weapons. She felt weak, helpless. An unfamiliar feeling.

“Go. Go back into your home. Get out of my sight.” The senior officer was speaking, this time in German. Stefania didn’t understand the exact words, but his hand motions made the meaning clear.

“Come children, quickly, now” she said, and gathering her brood at her side, she hastily led them back into the house and slammed the door behind her. Outside, the Germans departed. And that was the end of the incident except for the cleaning up of feces and vomit.

A small price to pay, I think, for nine precious lives. A minor sacrifice for future generations of decent, hard-working, law-abiding Babiks.

In the years to come, I imagine, Stefania will keep the story of this day alive for her children, and some day they will pass it down to their own children. The explanation they will offer as to why the Germans did not kill them is this: that the mysterious fourth officer felt so guilty about gunning down all those innocent children, he convinced (or commanded) the others to let them all go. That is what Stefania told her husband she believed.

There may have been such instances during the war, of course, but I do not think that was the likely scenario in this case.

More probably—although no one will ever know for sure—Babik's family was spared because of the reputation of Babik himself. After all, a dead or captured Jan Babik was one thing. But to kill his family while he was still on the run would bring the Germans no closer to finding him. More than that, it might invite considerable retribution. Given Babik's long-standing regard for being crazy, dangerous, and cunning; his connections to shadowy partisan units; and his presumed link to others in the criminal underworld, he could indeed have presented a problem to the Germans if further enraged.

Better to kill the man first, *then* dispose of his family. That, I think, was the overriding judgement which saved an entire family that day.

And in the days that followed, we were told the Germans kept an even closer watch on the Babik house, and organized regular patrols into the nearby forests.

As it was, Babik and I were far away by then, unaware of the terror Stefania had just faced. We were on foot, heading to Podkarpacie, several days' journey south of Debica and Sedziszow. We took our time getting there, following a circuitous route mapped by Babik's instincts, stopping to rob farms and homes in small villages along the way.

Once again, we remained a step ahead of the Germans, even as other groups and individuals also in hiding were captured and killed all around us.

This entire area was part of the larger Krakow District—Krakow, of course, being the headquarters for Nazi-occupied Poland—so it was not surprising that here would be the largest presence of military and police forces of any district in Poland.

Yet Babik and I continued to move about almost as if we were transparent,

like a pane of newly-washed glass.

Luck? I wondered. Babik's sixth sense? Something else? How is it possible to be active—stealing food and other necessities, supplying and profiting from the black market, carrying out acts of sabotage against the enemy—yet evade capture every time? How is it possible?

Questions without answers.

8. Podkarpacie

The Wisloka River, which separates Straszecin from Debica, meanders for a few miles southwest of those towns, then takes a gentle curve near Pilzno where it changes course, heading south by—ever so slightly—southeast, where it transverses the town of Jaslo on its way to the Slovakian border.

Stretching in a narrow band both east and west of Jaslo lies the rugged, heavily forested region known as Podkarpacie. Here hills and ridges sweep in a gradual arc of caves and hollows, valleys and canyons, to meet the Tatra Mountains along Poland's southern-most border. The region offered ideal hiding and meeting places for underground groups familiar with the terrain.

I had never before been this far south, but Babik clearly knew the area well. "It's where I head when things get hot," he said to me many times.

On our three-day trek from Straszecin, we moved by night, as always, helping ourselves to food from the fields and sleeping away the daylight hours in concealment deep within the forests. Toward dawn following the third night, we reached our destination. It was a stretch of high riverbank along the Wisloka, just north of the town of Jaslo.

"Here we are, kid. Our home for a while."

We stood on a grassy, wind-swept bluff overlooking the river. In the surreal pre-dawn murkiness, Babik gestured grandly with his right hand, indicating the nothingness that surrounded us.

I squinted, looked right and left. I saw only grass and scrub, which rose gracefully to form a gentle knoll, then sloped gradually downward. The forest began about 30 yards behind us. Ahead of us, or more exactly, 10 yards below, was the river itself, flowing toward the Slovakian border.

"Aren't we going into the forest?" I asked. "I don't see any place to hide around here."

Babik flashed one of his rare smiles, although in the dim light I was not sure if it was a smile or a sneer.

"That's good," the master escape artist said, "because if you don't see it, nobody else will, either. It's hidden me good over the years."

As I watched in astonishment, my guide and protector crouched down beside the edge of the mound, and carefully peeled back a layer of grass, moss and other scrub—it looked to be about four feet square—as if he were removing an area rug. It exposed planks of barn siding, tightly aligned together over a square framework of two-by-fours. One by one, Babik removed the planks of siding and dropped them into the pit below.

"What are you staring at?" Babik spoke to me gruffly, but he was grinning. "You never walked into a room from up on top? Follow me, kid."

With that, Babik descended into the hole, carrying with him the mat of vegetal covering that had rested on the very top. A crude ladder had been built, also with two-by-fours, to provide access in and out of the clever hideout, whose floor rested about 10 feet beneath the surface.

As my feet touched the bottom, the cavernous space was suddenly flooded with light. Babik had fumbled around in the dark, finding a match and a

kerosene lamp that had been lying nearby. It now burned brightly.

“We’re going to be in the dark the rest of the day,” he said, “but first, I thought you’d like to look around.”

I could not believe my eyes. It was like being in a cave, only this cavern was man-made, hollowed inside the bluff and roughly framed with lumber. It was surprisingly roomy, enabling the stocky Babik to stand and move about comfortably. The dirt floor was dry, suggesting that the river was still far below. A metal tube vented to the outside for air, but it would only be seen by someone down at the level of the river, looking up.

Surveying the room, I saw a large fiber mat that covered part of the floor. A blanket lay heaped on one corner. In addition to the lamp, there were assorted items that Babik had stored away during previous visits: odd pieces of clothing, potatoes and beets, a jar of what looked to be vodka or homemade brandy, and weapons, which included Russian grenades and a rifle.

Seeing me stare at the weapons, Babik shrugged, “There’s only so much I can carry around with me. But I think between you and me, we’ll put everything here to good use.”

Before we settled in for the long day ahead, Babik carried the strips of siding up the ladder and, working from below, put all but the last one in place. He used the open space to maneuver the grassy covering into place on top, then put back the last strip of wood.

Satisfied with his own prudence, he said to me, “Now if anyone walks above, they won’t fall into our little rabbit hole.”

With that, he extinguished the lantern, and we settled down in the cool subterranean lair to sleep away the daylight hours. We had covered a great distance, after all; both of us were thoroughly exhausted. But just before sleep came to me, some of Babik’s words ran through my head, fitting together like

pieces of a puzzle: *It's where I head when things get hot ... hidden me well over the years...*

I realized the man had built this hideout before the war, when he was eluding the Polish authorities.

I marveled at Babik's ingenuity—his genius, perhaps—as a professional escapee. Then I drifted off, slipping reluctantly into a deep, uneasy sleep.

"Tonight, you'll stay here," Babik instructed me when darkness fell. "I got to meet some people."

"Why don't they meet you here?" I knew the rules, that I was to be kept apart, but it was a lonely existence.

"You think I let anyone else know about this place? You're the first to ever set foot in it, kid. Let me tell you something: one reason other people die in the forests is because they move around in groups and hide together. Me, I operate alone, I go under cover alone. And I don't share my hiding places with no one. At least, not until you came along."

"What will I do down here until you return?"

"Same thing you always do: wait. Breathe. Try to stay alive."

For me, the toughest part of my time with Babik was the long, sequestered periods of inactivity. I yearned for more action, longed to meet "Stach" or "Kruk" or whoever Babik was seeing. *Surely they're partisans*, I thought. *Or maybe they're criminals who Babik knew before the war. Come to think of it, is there really any longer a difference between the two?*

To my mind, all partisans were freedom fighters. I wasn't aware of the distinctions between the two primary groups that had recently formed. But if I had been given more direct exposure to them, I might have realized at least one telling difference between the Soviet-backed People's Guard (with whom "Stach"

and “Kruk” had to be affiliated, I realized later), and the Home Army—a larger, more organized force whose members were supported by the Polish government-in-exile in London.

From its very beginnings in the summer of 1942, the People’s Guard accepted anyone willing to fight: Jews, Gypsies, escaped POW’s, even bandits like Babik. The Home Army, on the other hand, was far more discriminating.

Many anti-socials were attracted to the People’s Guard not necessarily because they had pro-Communist leanings, but—according to much that has been written on the subject—often simply because they were looking for action. The People’s Guard promised this from the very start, encouraging Jews and Poles alike to rise up against the Germans. It backed its position with deeds and arms, even sending military advisors into the ghettos to instruct Jews in how to use their newly-acquired weapons.

From what I have read, there may have been as many as 5,000 Jewish partisans alone in the People’s Guard, but there were likely no more than several hundred in the Home Army. “Jews are not fighters,” many Home Army members believed, and much of the rank-and-file membership arguably harbored a fair degree of anti-Semitism. As a group, the Home Army showed little interest in the plight of Poland’s Jewish citizens, although it has been said there were notable exceptions within the organization, especially at the top.

Be that as it may, the Home Army—whose members all took a blood oath of loyalty—certainly would not have done business with a man like Jan Babik. If anything, they might have killed him, given the opportunity, simply because of his activities against the Germans. From what I know now, they considered acts of military sabotage to be ineffective, and even worse, dangerous, because it guaranteed reprisals against the Polish people. For this reason, the Home Army engaged mainly in espionage and economic sabotage. They also sought out

traitors and informers. But they did not, until much later in the war, place emphasis on military actions against the Germans.

In these and other ways, the Home Army and People's Guard clashed with each other both philosophically and politically from the very beginning. And the situation would continue to deteriorate as the war wore on.

But while I struggled to stay alive, I was unaware of these politics. I must admit I do not particularly care to know about them now, except that they have shed some light on several of the assignments Babik had in store for me. Indeed, my only concern at the time, understandably, was for the knowing emptiness in my stomach and the almost constant disorientation from not knowing whether it was day or night.

When Babik finally returned, he was carrying carrots, cucumbers and tomatoes. And something else: a hind quarter of crisp rabbit, still warm from a fire.

"Where—" I started to ask, but Babik raised his hand to stop me before any more words poured out.

"Never mind," he said. "Just eat. I already had my share."

As I devoured the sumptuous feast, Babik took a drink from a nearly full brandy jar and passed it over.

"For your health," he offered. "It will also help you sleep, since you been getting no exercise. That will change tomorrow night, by the way, when you can come with me. There's someone wants to meet you."

I helped myself to several long swallows of the fiery brandy. The alcohol, along with the full meal, made me drowsy. Before long I was nodding off, and this time, I think, my sleep was dreamless.

The next day at dusk, we cautiously emerged from our hole beneath the hillock.

The last rays of light shimmered on the river like mischievous sprites, bobbing and weaving along the surface of the water. While Babik concealed the entrance, I breathed deeply, taking in the fresh evening air.

I was burning with curiosity as I followed my guardian through the woods. After a vigorous walk of more than an hour, we emerged from a stand of pines to face a wheat field that grew right to the edge of the forest. Even in the pallid moonlight, it was evident that the tall grain was yellowing with the hot, dry weather. In a week or two it would be ready to harvest, after which the fields would not hide men in their midst for another year.

In the center of the field, a group of five men stood talking quietly. Four of them, from what I could see, were armed to the hilt with an assortment of Russian weapons. The fifth man stood out not just because he lacked any visible firearms, but because he appeared older than the others—he looked to be forty, maybe more. Also, while he wore the ragtag clothes of a forest dweller, he appeared, somehow, a little less disheveled.

The man was tall, easily six feet, with neat brown hair that had begun to gray a bit at the temples. His broad, friendly face somehow suggested a long line of Polish ancestry. While the others in the group seemed to be somewhat on edge, their eyes darting back and forth, this man looked directly at me as we approached.

Babik nodded to the group, but addressed the unarmed man. “This is the kid—this is Moniek—who I was telling you about.”

The man nodded, then faintly smiled at me.

Babik said to me, “This man is from Krakow. He’s a Catholic priest.”

I gasped. A priest! The man’s smile broadened at my response, but then it was gone.

“He’s risking his life just coming here,” Babik continued, “but he’s been ... I

guess you could say, helping ... groups like this one. He heard about you, and wanted to meet you.”

“You’re a very courageous young man,” the priest said.

“I do what I have to do, sir,” I responded, not knowing how to address a priest, having never met one before, let alone one who was not even dressed like a priest.

“Can we take a short walk together so that I may talk with you?” the priest asked.

I nodded, not sure what he could want with me. We strolled out of earshot of the others, navigating between the densely-planted stalks of wheat.

For the next ten minutes the priest spoke gently, softly, and I found myself captivated by him and his words. He never asked the details of what I had endured, but it was as if he *knew*, he could *feel* my suffering.

“There are some of my countrymen who see the horror of what is happening to the Jews, to others of their own background, as well,” said the priest, “and they’re risking their lives to save and shelter those they can.”

I wondered if he included Babik in that righteous group. Or was he perhaps aware that I had been saved by Babik for more than simply humanitarian reasons?

The priest continued, “But the others—a far, far greater number—they turn a blind eye on what is happening to your people. Many even claim to welcome it. For this apathy, this ignorance, I place some of the blame on the Catholic Church itself.”

He paused, took in my surprised reaction to his words, then explained. “You wouldn’t know this, but as long ago as 1936, Cardinal Hlond—he was head of the national church—Cardinal Hlond wrote and distributed messages of hate and distrust toward the Jews. *There will be a Jewish problem as long as the Jews*

remain ... that was one. Here's another: It is a fact that the Jews deceive, levy interest, and are pimps ... There's more, you can be sure, and it disgusts me, as I'm sure it does you.

"Is that bast—is that Cardinal—still head of the church?" I asked.

"Not here in Poland, thankfully. True to his cowardice, Hlond fled the country with the Polish government-in-exile."

The three-quarter moon had risen high in the sky, and even here in the wheat field, between the stalks, milky light was seeping through. It highlighted the face of the priest as he talked, revealing moisture that had pooled around his eyes.

His next words were measured, bitter. It was clear that he felt them deeply, and they have stayed with me to this day.

"I am ashamed of my own people"—his precise words—"both within the church and outside it. When the war ends and we have to answer to the rest of the world, what will we say? How will the Polish people face them?"

He turned his head away, and there was silence for several moments. Then, with a sigh, he looked back at me. His expression had turned cold.

"I have this feeling—this terrible fear—that when the war ends, it won't be the end of persecution, or bloodshed, or Jew-baiting. There are those of ... my people ... who will still need someone to fear, someone to blame."

I found myself captivated by the priest, and now my eyes also began to tear. It had been a while since tears came this easily to me, and they would not come often again, not for a great many years. But there was one thing I needed to confess to this man, this priest, who had just made a candid confession of his own.

"I've done some bad things myself, father"—I found it less difficult now to use that form of address—"I've robbed, I've ... done things I'm not proud of, but what else could I do? How else would I have stayed alive?"

The priest put his arm around me. "These are grievous times." He said it again: "Grievous times. What we do in war, will be forgiven."

Gradually, some of my guilt and shame began to dissipate. In their place, an icy lack of emotion seeped in, like a low pressure area displacing warmth and sunshine to herald in a less settled climate.

"But there are those who *I* can never forgive," I said defiantly. "*Never.*"

The priest squeezed my shoulder and looked down at the ground. Then together we walked in silence back to the rest of the group, for there was nothing more to say.

On our last night before heading back north, we enjoyed a grand repast. Babik had stolen a plump young pig from a nearby farm, and it was cooked by the men who had been with the priest two days earlier. They dug an underground pit and covered it with leaves so the smoke wouldn't give them away. I was invited to eat with the group—a rare occurrence—but there was little conversation and no talk, in my presence, of any resistance plans or other activities.

The priest was no longer there, but the fact that he had been with these men confirmed my assumption that they were partisans. I also noticed there was a bond between the men that was not shared with Babik. He had provided the main course but was clearly an outsider in this group. Babik himself had said as much: *I operate alone, I go under cover alone. And I don't share my hiding places with no one.* Yet Babik had known them before, had been here before, I was sure of it. *They must surely know his background,* I thought, *yet for some reason, they trust him.*

Throughout the quiet meal, the priest's words played over and over in my mind. Abruptly, I turned to Babik and cried, "Why was I so unlucky to be born a Jew?"

He seemed taken aback for a moment, but then he replied with one of his typically surly responses: "That's life, kid." Then he added, "Look at me. I been running all my life."

It was a decision you made, I thought. But me, I didn't ask to be a Jew. I didn't ask to be hated because of what I was born into. I looked glumly down at my feet, and did not say another word for the rest of the meal.

In the years that followed, I must tell you, I have continued to wonder about the priest, about the man who moved me to tears, for one brief moment, with words and with empathy and with compassion I had never before experienced.

Perhaps he was one of the thousands of priests who had been captured and imprisoned—Auschwitz, I understand, was the destination preferred by the Nazis for men of the cloth—then was released (it did happen now and then!) or, like Babik, found a way to escape.

Perhaps.

But more probably, I think, he was one of the several nameless priests of courage and conviction who belonged to a secret society led by Adam Sapieha, the Archbishop of Krakow. From what I heard after the war, Sapieha and his followers maintained contacts with partisan groups, performing such selfless acts as distributing baptismal certificates to Jews.

I never knew the name of the priest who talked with me, but I will always remember that I was in the company of a very special person.

And some weeks after I returned, with Babik, to the fields and forests not far from my home district near Debica, something happened that triggered the memory of that day anew.

It was late July—or had August already come?—and I was making a routine raid on a farmer's field I had visited many times before. Digging deep into the

soft soil, pulling up turnips to help quiet my growling stomach, I was caught by surprise as someone came up behind me. I had been spotted by the farmer whose field I invaded.

As I remained crouched on the ground, a voice behind me said, "Put your hands in the air and get up slowly."

I could actually feel the rifle that was aimed at me. An audible click told me a bullet had dropped into position, ready to be fired.

Without moving, I said quietly, "Mister, does one of us have to die over a couple of goddamned turnips?"

"Your hands. In the air. Now, you miserable thief."

As you wish, I thought.

I slowly began to straighten up, plucking the Luger from my waistband as I started to raise my hands. Then, spinning around, I fired into the chest of the man who stood before me.

Forgetting the turnips, but with the presence of mind to grab the Pole's rifle, I ran back into the woods as fast as I could. And as I ran, words I heard in the forest of Podkarpacie played over and over again in my mind.

What we do in war, will be forgiven.

And I thought, *But I'm not willing to forgive. So how the hell can I expect anyone to forgive me?*

9. Grabiny station

Shortly after Babik and I returned from Podkarpacie, he found a way to see his wife. The meeting took place well away from their hiding place, and this time, I was not invited to come along.

When he returned—sharing a small portion of Stefania’s home cooking that was not, it is safe to say, prepared for *my* enjoyment—he was unusually agitated. That is when he relayed Stefania’s story of how close his family had come to being mowed down by German bullets.

You do not know what it’s like to have no one, I thought then. *The thought occurs to you, the possibilities are real, but still you do not know...*

We were changing locations nearly every day or two, basing our strategy of movement on Babik’s intuition, and now on mine, as well, for there were times when I sensed danger, too—how, I could not say—and we fled, only to learn that a hunt for fugitives had indeed taken place in the area we had left behind.

Babik was leaving me by myself for up to two days at a time now, revealing nothing about what he did or who he saw when he was away. But when we were together, we continued our regular late night robberies, and as a result, seldom wanted for food or clothing.

On one mild September evening, Babik handed me a package, with a name and location in Grabiny. Grabiny—the village where Papa and I had gone before ... before ...

“This is a family you can trust,” Babik told me. “I know the village holds some bad feelings for you, but—”

“You do not know what the village holds for me,” I interrupted, no longer fearing to hide my anger. “You do not know my feelings, you do not know what happened before you saw me crawl out from under my father’s body, or what cost my father his life.”

Lucky for me, Babik was not put off by my wrath. When he responded, I was surprised how soft his voice had become. “I know more than you think. I was at the train station long before I came up to you and carried you back to my house. And give me some credit, will you, kid? I always make it my business to

know what goes on around me.”

I calmed down a little. Now I was unsure exactly *where* to direct the angst that had built up inside of me.

“Tell you what,” he continued. “Get it off your chest. Tell me about Grabiny, how you ended up ... how things happened the way they did.”

I must have looked at him rather skeptically, for he said, “Really. Out with it. I want to hear it all. Then you will deliver the goddamn package like I told you, understand?”

German soldiers and their informers were everywhere: on the roads, in the villages, and by late 1942, in the forests as well, conducting random hunts with trained Alsatian shepherd dogs. Alongside the Germans were the infamous Blue Police and yet another dangerous enemy: the NSZ—National Armed Forces. This was an extreme right-wing group of virulent Polish fascists and anti-Semites. They knew the places Jews were likely to hide far better than did the Germans, and from everything we heard, eagerly murdered every Jew they could find. Needless to say, Papa and I were constantly on the move, living each day in fear.

Although we had little need to know the day or date, we were pretty sure the new year had come some weeks before. One thing we did feel with absolute certainty was the persistent, numbing cold in our extremities and the emptiness in our stomachs. The barns were locked tight at night, and while I had recently figured a way to break into the church barn by jimmying a window, we knew it would be foolhardy to return again too quickly.

The last time we had eaten had been two days earlier—a few raw potatoes, which we found in a winter storage area under earth and straw. Papa and I both realized we were growing weak.

My father, however, had been turning something over in his mind, and he

must have decided that it was time to act. Late one afternoon, he said quietly to me, "Tonight we're going into Grabiny." The village was only a short walk away.

I looked uncertainly at him. "What will we do there?"

"I had—have—a friend there. You may remember him: Piatek. It's been a long time, you were young when you last saw him."

The name meant nothing to me. I remained silent.

"Look, I've known him since we were children," Papa went on. "I'm not going to ask him to hide us, just to give us some food, this one time only. *Moishele*, we have to trust *someone*. We're going to starve by staying here, so we might as well take our chances in the village. Piatek will help us, you'll see."

It wasn't fear of being caught in the village that made me feel apprehensive. Truth be told, I was tired of the forests, and eager to venture outside, if only for a short while. There was something else that bothered me—a premonition, looking back on it—but I would never question my father's decision.

"I'm ready, papa," I said finally. "Let's go into Grabiny."

Papa was certainly aware of the dangers. Grabiny, unlike our home village of Straszecin a few kilometers northeast, was directly on the major west to east rail line that connected Krakow to Lwow on the Eastern front. This would increase the probability of German soldiers passing through the village. Papa chose what seemed to be the safest route to Piatek's house, allowing us to remain hidden by the forest for all but a short distance. It would be foolish to count on the unfolding darkness alone to conceal us.

We approached from the east, emerging from a dense stand of birch trees, then crossing two fields that lay between us and the house of his friend. The frozen ground that crackled beneath our feet reminded me of breaking glass.

And there, just ahead, stood the house. I noticed weathered wood siding was coming loose in one corner from the frame beneath. The house looked much

like the my own former home, although the Piatek residence looked to be considerably larger.

Papa rapped on the door. A moment later, it opened a crack, the hinges obeying with a strident groan. Peering through the opening was a man of about my father's age, staring with a look of surprise into our drawn, haggard faces. Piatek, I assumed.

"Goldner, it's been a long time," he said, looking warily at my father.

It seemed to me that the words came out cautiously, more as a statement of the obvious, certainly not with a ring of any overt enthusiasm. The man's eyes darted to me, but they revealed nothing. The brief silence was awkward.

"Please, my friend, I'm asking you a big favor," Papa finally stammered. His breath materialized in great clouds of steam. "We haven't had so much as a piece of bread in months. If you'll sell me a loaf, I'll pay you anything, anything you want, when the war ends."

Piatek remained silent, as if thinking over the request. The tension was palpable. Then I noticed that the man seemed to relax a little, the corner of his mouth turning up in what might have been the faintest hint of a smile.

"Of course, come in. Looks like you and—your son, is it?—can both use a good meal."

Piatek opened the door, and led us toward the kitchen. He was tall, I observed, with a working man's callused hands and a wiry build that seemed somewhat contradicted by a full face. There was a scar over his right cheek, not a fresh wound, but one that had not completely healed. And he sported a mustache, neatly trimmed, showing no signs of gray. None of these facts made much of an impression on me when I first saw the man. But, in playing the scene over and over in my mind later, it's strange how many seemingly meaningless details had somehow been imbedded in my memory.

Curiously, Piatek asked no questions of us when we came in, made no inquiries as to our welfare.. Perhaps no questions were necessary, I thought. Could the man have any idea that this was our first time inside a real home in nearly two years?

I had thoughts of my own home, of the farm house just a few kilometers away. I wondered if it still stood empty, or if by now it had been “acquired” by another Polish family in search of more land, eager to take advantage of the Jews’ losses.

Piatek set two chairs for my father and me at the table. We sat in grateful silence while he brought out a loaf of bread, then busied himself cutting off a small piece of cooked chicken. I looked closely at my father’s friend, tried to remember him from long ago. Perhaps I was very young when the man had last been at our house, for he was a stranger to me now.

At the back of the main room, an alcove led to two bedrooms. In one corner of this alcove, a chubby gray cat lay dozing on a pile of warm clothing, and I keenly eyed both the new-looking apparel and the obviously well-fed animal. I felt momentarily embarrassed at my own deteriorating clothes. They weren’t much more than rags any more, reeking of barns, of the forest, of my own fear and misery. I wondered where Piatek’s family was at this moment, for the house was quiet. They were probably asleep in the back rooms, I guessed, though I had no idea of the hour. Time was for people who had places to go, schedules to keep.

“This war is tough on everyone,” Piatek finally offered, as he set the scraps of chicken down in front of us.

Gazing around the cozy house, with its warm hearth, abundant clothing and stocked larder, I wanted to say, *obviously the war is not so tough on some of us*. But I held my tongue, and ate in silence with my father.

Maybe it was the food in front of us, or the comforting fire, or the hospitality of a former friend of my father's, but as we ate, we were completely unaware that our host had slipped out of the room. Nor did we notice that when he returned, he was carrying several lengths of thick rope.

Before Papa and I realized what was happening, Piatek had come from behind and pinned my father to his chair with savage determination and lightening speed, lashing him tightly to it with the rope. It took me a moment to understand what was going on, and for reasons I will never understand, I must have simply froze, because in the next moment I was being tied to my chair as well.

"You son of a bitch!" Papa cried out. "What are you doing?"

Piatek was breathing hard. There was a sense of duty, not remorse, in his reply. "I'm in charge of the village now. The *naczelnik*. It's my responsibility to take you in."

"Your responsibility?" Papa was incredulous. "You were at my wedding. We were friends, or have you forgotten?"

"Times change. People change." Piatek bound my father's ankles together. "Friendships change."

"I trusted you with my life. With my son's life. And this is what you do?"

Piatek shrugged. "I do what I have to do. I, too, am trying to stay alive. If you hadn't come here..." he paused, but apparently decided not to finish the thought.

One final tug at the rope, then Piatek turned toward the door, grabbed a coat that was hanging on a peg, and walked out into the dark void to make arrangements, I suppose, for our disposal.

I looked at my father, felt his helplessness. I wished I had not eaten the piece of chicken. It left a bad taste in my mouth, a taste of fear. I berated

myself—and still do, even now—for not reacting differently when Piatek lunged for my father. If I had acted, we might have escaped. In the forests, we were always alert. Here, our guard was down. It was, after all, supposed to be the home of a friend.

My arms were already getting sore from being stretched behind the back of my chair, and my wrists were chafing from the tightness of the rope. But the only pain that mattered at that moment was the hurt and fury I saw in my father's eyes.

"Papa, it's not your fault. You couldn't have known."

No response.

I tried again. "He won't go through with this, you know. He will start thinking about how long he's known you, he will let us go, no one has to know we were even here!"

Still Papa kept his silence. A spark from the fire danced past my ear. It landed on the table, quickly changing color from a fiery yellow-red to the sullen ash gray of a dying ember.

"Papa, he was your *friend*."

A tear formed in the corner of Papa's right eye, began a salty trail down his flushed cheek. His words came out measured, bitter.

"*Moishеле*, we have no friends. The rules all changed when the Germans came. Or maybe it was always like this, only hidden, just below the surface, like potatoes in the fields. I thought maybe ... I thought somehow it would be different with Piatek, that he'd at least give us some bread and let us scramble back into the forest. I expected no more, just a simple gesture, some small act of kindness such as one might do for a ... a ..." The pampered feline sleeping in the alcove caught his eye. "...a hungry, homeless cat. I never expected *this*."

Papa was silent for a moment, then more tears welled up in his eyes and he

spoke again, this time softer, calmer. "You know what's been going through my mind? What those German bastards took from us on top of everything else?"

"Mama? Gita?"

"God protect them, but no, I was thinking of something else." Papa looked at me. "I was thinking you never were able to go through with your *Bar Mitzvah*."

"God doesn't care," I answered. There was venom in my voice. "If there is a God, where is he? Why does he let this happen?"

Papa let out his breath in a long, low sigh, like a tire slowly deflating. "I don't know. I wish I had an answer. I wish I understood myself."

"I love you, Papa," I choked out, softly.

"You too, son. I love you too."

Then my father turned away, a fraction of a whole, unable to do what was expected of him, what any man would do: protect his family in the face of all adversity. In the end, I am certain, he felt that he had failed us, that he had failed himself.

He must have known it then, my poor Papa: he must have known beyond any question of a doubt that the price of that failure would be death.

Throughout the long, hopeless night, my father and I sat tightly bound to our chairs. From time to time we each struggled to twist and maneuver our wrists in an attempt to loosen the rope, but Piatek was obviously accomplished at holding his prisoners; the bindings would not come loose.

There was little conversation in the hours that remained, and needless to say, little sleep. I had experienced fear before, but my feelings that night extended beyond simple terror to reach a realm that touched on near madness: a melange of panic and hatred and defiance and utter helplessness, all consuming me in unison, chewing off little chunks of reason, pulling together to divide my

emotions and scatter them in different directions. Death was beginning to look like an exalted release, except I vowed once again that I would not willingly embrace such an easy way out.

All too soon, dawn began to break. Another promise of a new day. This one, however, would be overcast and bitterly cold. Not that any of it mattered.

Piatek had come back several hours earlier, walked past Papa and me without saying a word, and retired into his bedroom. I heard whispers from behind the closed door, muted communion of husband and wife, I suppose, although we never saw her. *Does she know what sort of fiend her husband is?* I wondered. *Is she any different?*

Shortly after daybreak, there appeared at the door one of Piatek's cronies: a heavy-set, unsavory character who Piatek called Grych. The two men lifted my father and me and carried us, bound hand and foot, to a waiting horse cart.

We had gone less than a mile when the cart stopped. We were in front of the Grabiny train station. The same station where—a lifetime ago, it seemed to me—Papa had detrained, most Fridays, after selling his cattle in cities to the west.

As Grabiny was one of three rural stops in the short distance between the major Tarnow and Debica stations, the little station itself was nothing much to look at: a small wooden structure along the tracks, a place of shelter for waiting passengers. It had once been painted a steel blue, but had grown faded and sullied, giving it a pallor of soiled gray. Like most everything else, the whole structure was greatly in need of restoration.

As we pulled up, I saw just one person at the station: an elderly woman. She glanced at the cart, at us, then averted her eyes and hurried on.

In sheer terror, I must confess I wet myself. I felt helpless, like a baby.

Piatek and Grych sat silently up front, waiting. Papa and I were positioned back to back, where we also sat, waiting ... for what, we were not exactly sure.

The horse gave an impatient snort. In the distance, the chugging sound of an approaching train broke the silence.

They're waiting for the train, I realized then. They're waiting for the Germans to do their dirty work. I wondered what was going through my father's head at that moment. "What will be, will be?" Now you know what will be, Papa. Now you surely know.

The disgusting hands of Piatek and Grych grasped roughly at us, dragging us out of the cart, pushing us against the side of the station house. Papa turned toward me, started to say something...

"Shut up," commanded Piatek, and slapped Papa hard across the face. "No sound from either of you. And stay on your feet."

The train had stopped with a huge hiss of steam. The doors opened, but just one passenger got out: a young soldier, fresh-faced with a smartly pressed uniform. Piatek walked over to meet him, while Grych watched over us.

The German was a sturdy man of about 25, but in spite of his stiff demeanor, I would always remember a softness about his eyes. He conferred briefly with Piatek, then the two of them walked over to Papa and me.

Grych grinned with anticipation, undoubtedly thinking of the reward Piatek would share with him: a few kilos of sugar, perhaps, or even better, several liters of vodka. No doubt he had seen the posters put up by the Germans. He surely knew the worth of a Jew.

"Kill them," Papa's good friend Piatek said coldly.

The soldier looked at Papa and me, looked directly into our eyes, lingering an extra moment on my own frightened face. Then he turned back to the village leader who had summoned him. The inconceivable words that he spoke were not often uttered, I imagine, by a Nazi in occupied Poland. I will never forget his exact words to Piatek.

"You know," the soldier began, "these two may be Jews, but what I see in front of me are two human beings. And you make me come here to kill two innocent people?" He lowered his voice, then continued. "It's just possible that Germany won't win the war. Keep that in mind. And if the Third Reich is not victorious, do you know what could happen to you?"

Piatek, the cold cowardly bastard, was unmoved. "Just do your job and kill the damn Jews," he growled. "Kill them like all the others, and be done with it." Then he added, "Start with the boy. Let the father watch."

The soldier stared deep into Piatek's eyes. If he was looking for some indication that the Pole might waver, might retreat from his position, he found none. This was not an act of war, it was cold-blooded murder, and from his own words, the young German soldier knew it. But he also must have known he could not escape his duty, regardless of any sudden dictates of conscience. Piatek was a powerful man, I know now, well connected at high levels in the *Wehrmacht*. Perhaps the SS as well. Poles as cooperative as that one, he might have thought, must be cultivated, played, until the day when they no longer prove useful...

Piatek pushed Papa and me closer together.

I looked at my father helplessly. His eyes were wide in terror as the German unshouldered his rifle.

Behind the soldier, I saw Grych licking his lips, not unlike a wolf cornering its prey. Then he muttered, to no one in particular, "I wonder if the boy will fetch as much as the father?"

"*Shema Yisroel ...*" Papa's lips moved almost imperceptibly in soft prayer. I noticed it, but was too paralyzed with my own fear to speak, too angry with God to pray. All I saw was the barrel of the rifle, pointed directly at me. I am ashamed to say I lost control of my bowels.

The soldier hesitated, then squeezed the trigger.

I closed my eyes.

“Adonoi eloheynu...”

I felt a spasm of pain as hot lead pierced my flesh. *Is this what death feels like?* I remember thinking.

My legs collapsed under me and I fell to the ground, while Papa, I think, screamed my name.

“Adonoi echod.”

The officer must have quickly shifted his line of sight to my father, for it was a split second later that he fired again. A single shot. A fatal shot.

Papa fell dead, directly on top of me.

And that is the last thing I remember.

“I can tell you what little happened after that,” Babik said, when I finished telling him some of what I have just documented here. “It gets worse, if that’s possible.”

I had been shaking uncontrollably as I talked, but now I looked up at him and tried to compose myself.

“You saw the whole thing? The shooting and everything?”

“I tried to tell you that, yes. I was ... close to the station when you and your father were brought in on the cart.”

“What were you doing there?”

Annoyance: “I was there, that will have to do.”

“I’m sorry. Please tell me: what happened after the shooting? I have to know.”

“Understand, there was nothing I could do to stop it. I was—am—hiding from a lot of people who would like nothing better than to kill me. And there are people right now who depend on my staying alive. I can tell you there were passengers looking out the train windows during the ... incident. They did

nothing, of course, because such shootings are a common occurrence. Everyone fears for their own lives. Not just Jews.”

I let the comment pass.

“Anyway, I saw Piatek’s helper, the man you called Grych, nod approvingly after the shots were fired. Then he wiped his hands on his pants, can you believe it? As if that cleansed him of all responsibility! He started to walk away, but turned around when he heard Piatek mutter something to the young soldier. That’s when the Kraut handed over his rifle to the village *naczelnik*.”

I was appalled. “He handed his rifle to Piatek?”

“From where I watched, it seemed to me like he did it reluctantly, but remember, Piatek was a big shot in Grabiny.

I hated to interrupt again, but I had to ask: “You knew who Piatek was?”

“I knew the bastard the second I saw him get off the wagon and pull you out. Everyone knows who he is. That he’s an informer.”

“My father thought he was a friend.”

“Friends, enemies ... who can tell one from the other anymore?”

Babik seemed lost in thought for a moment. Then: “Anyway, apparently your father’s *friend* was not convinced you were dead. Piatek took that goddamn rifle and with savagery that shocked even me, tried to jab the extended bayonet all the way through your father’s dead body. His first blow must have struck the poor man’s shoulder blade. There was the grisly sound of metal on bone.”

Babik stopped again, looked to see my reaction. “You sure you want to hear this?”

I nodded. I wanted it to feed my rage, my need for revenge.

“Well, next thing I hear an angry growl come from somewhere deep in Piatek’s throat, behind teeth clenched in twisted rage. He pulls out the bayonet, and taking more care maybe, stabs again at your father’s body, using all his

strength to push the bloodied steel blade in deeply, deeply, to make sure he reaches your body beneath. Something must have led him to believe he was successful. Lucky for you, he only nicked your back, yes? Well, again he withdraws the blade, and for a moment it looks to me like he might kick your father's body out of the way to make sure you're good and dead. But who knows, maybe his frenzy is gone by this point, because he calmly hands back the rifle to the Kraut, nods to Grych, and together, the two crazy bastards get back on their wagon and ride off.

"What about the son-of-a-bitch who shot us?"

"The Kraut? He got back on the eastbound train just as it pulled out of the station. Probably went on to the next stop in Debica, in search of a beer, or a cigarette, or a few more Jews, who the hell knows. Me, I thought you was dead just like Piatek must have thought you was dead. I was still hanging around the station after the place cleared out, that's when I saw you crawling over to the bushes. Well, you know the rest."

"The most important thing, I still do not know," I said in a meek, small voice.

"What is that, kid?"

"Why me? Why did you come over to me then? Why did you take me to your home? Why did you risk your own neck to save me?"

A moment's silence, then: "Like I told you before, you ask too many questions. It's time for you to take that package of mine into Grabiny. Right past Piatek's German ass-kissing nose."

Actually, it was pure chance that brought Jan Babik to the Grabiny station just as the boy and his father were being pulled off the wagon.

Shortly after his escape, Babik decided to look up two former customers,

men who had been big purchasers of stolen weapons before his capture in the round-up. Both had been activist leaders during the farmers' revolt of 1936, and had now just formed a nine-man attack squad of resistance fighters under the authority of the Soviet-backed People's Guard. Taking command was Stanislaw Jaskier (code name "Stach") along with his First Lieutenant, Piotr Chlendowski (code name "Kruk"—"raven" in Polish).

"Join us," they had begged Babik at the time. "We need a man of your resourcefulness."

"I work alone," Babik told them. "And I don't take orders from no one. But I share your loathing of the Germans. I can help you if you can afford me."

And so the relationship began: Babik the lifelong combatant, joining the fight for freedom not as a loyal partisan, but as a mercenary.

The first successful action under Jaskier's command had been an act of sabotage at the train station in Czarna—between Tarnow and Grabiny—only weeks earlier. Babik sold explosives that led to the destruction of rails and phone wires, disrupting transportation between Krakow and the Eastern front for hours. Buoyed by their success, the squad decided to plan a similar attack days later at Grabiny, the next stop on the line a couple miles to the east.

Babik was in Grabiny looking for a secure position from which to reconnoiter German patrols. As he hid within a clump of birch trees across and slightly down from the station house, he heard a loud commotion. Looking up, he saw a man and boy being pushed against the wall. He thought he recognized the man as the Jew from his own village—not the shopkeeper but the cattle man—and guessed the boy must be his son.

He watched as Piatek had words with the German officer. As the German fired. As the boy went down, then the father. As Piatek took the German's rifle and ran the bayonet into the lifeless forms. As the officer boarded the train. As

the train pulled out of the station, continuing east to Debica. As Grych licked his lips, as Piatek walked away, satisfied. And an hour later, he was still watching as the boy—whom he really had assumed was dead—crawled out from beneath his father's body and weakly pulled himself into the bushes at the rear of the station.

At that moment, Babik saw images of all the children he'd seen murdered in Auschwitz. This boy from his village was considerably older, but he was still a child. And he was going to bleed to death if nothing was done.

Surprising himself, Babik reflexively moved toward Moniek even moments before his mind began to fill with ideas on how the youngster might be useful to him if the wounds didn't prove fatal.

The boy was in shock, he could see that. But he'd seen worse in Auschwitz. He'd seen crimes so much more heinous than his own, acts of such animal savagery that ... well, somehow his confinement there had changed him, made him more ... not compassionate, exactly. Perhaps more tolerant. Yes, that would not be an overstatement.

The boy he came upon here at the Grabiny station could be saved, he was fairly sure of it. Indeed, the boy might even come in handy, help him carry out various schemes and plans he was just beginning to devise.

After all, there was always a plan.

I had run packages for Babik many times by now. I knew the routine.

The package was compact enough to fit inside my lightweight jacket and could contain almost anything—small arms, explosives, forged papers—who was to say? Babik had made all the arrangements, and now the drop was up to me. One reason I went, and not him, was because I stood a far better chance of getting in and out without arousing suspicion from the Germans or the villagers themselves. I would once again play the part of an innocent Polish child. It had

always worked before.

“The reason I’ve never been killed,” I once told Babik in a rare light moment, “is because the bullets all go over my head.”

I approached Grabiny well after dark, wary of Piatek and Grych who would kill me in an instant if they knew they had not succeeded the first time. I did not know it then, but Grych, by that time, was no longer a problem to anyone. He had been killed some six months earlier. Trampled by his own bull in the field behind his house.

Tentatively, I approached the designated house for my drop. It was distinguished from others by a brightly painted outdoor oven just off to the side, between the house and a small field.

I knocked on the door, tapping out a simple code. The door opened, first just a little, then wider, and I was quickly ushered inside.

Taking stock of the dimly lit room, I found it to be much like my own home had been, only this house had one main room and what I assumed were two small bedrooms closed off behind doors in the back.

The man who let me in was thin and balding, 40 to 45 years old, with narrow, penetrating eyes. The man introduced himself as Wladyslaw, using the first name only. Then he summoned his wife to put out something for me to eat. I could hear two small children playing in one of the rooms. They were probably no older than seven or eight, judging from their squeaky, muffled voices.

Two other men were in the main room, both younger than the man of the house, but they were not introduced to me. I could not tell anything about them from the way they were dressed; in those times, everyone’s clothing was ragged, whether you hid in the forest or lived in a home.

The man’s wife was more than generous with the food she put before me—warm cabbage soup, a heel of sour rye bread, a small pirogue—and I ate

ravenously. Who knew when I might ever enjoy a home-cooked meal again, let alone one served comfortably indoors?

While I ate, the three men went into the unoccupied bedroom with the package I had delivered. From the looks on their faces when they returned, they were not disappointed.

Wladyslaw had just started to ask me how I came to be in the service of Jan Babik when we were startled by a loud banging on the front door.

In German: "*Gestapo. Open at once!*"

The first thing that occurred to me was that I had walked into a trap. Perhaps Babik was wrong about this family! I jumped up from the table and looked to my host, who signaled with his eyes and a nod of his head for me to go into the unoccupied bedroom. Seeing no other alternative, I ran into the bedroom and closed the door.

From inside the room, I could hear the outside door open. I tried to catch the words of the German officer, who was inquiring about a "*Juden kind*," a Jewish child who had been seen in the area.

Damn!

I must have been spotted and turned in by a bounty hunter. *Was it someone who knows me?* I wondered (since my own former home was in the next village up the road). *Or did some Nazi lover become suspicious because I was a stranger?* Probably the latter, I decided, because anyone who knew me would know I was no child. Not that either possibility mattered much. Those days, being known or unknown could be equally dangerous.

"I assure you, the only children here are my own two ..." came the words of the man of the house, cut off before he could finish.

"Be silent. I will search," came the reply. I was elated—he said "I," not "we." The German was alone. I gripped my Luger tightly, standing behind the

bedroom door. I would not push my luck by hiding again under a bed.

I heard the door to the other bedroom open. The chatter of the two children stopped abruptly.

“Oh, you have the same color hair as my little boy,” the officer was saying.

Then: a light thud, as the door was closed. The sound of heavy leather boots approaching. The door to my room, slowly opening ...

The Gestapo officer stood six-foot-three, a full fifteen inches taller than me. I suppose that since he probably thought he was searching for a child, he did not take precautions he might otherwise have exercised. All I know is, he walked directly ahead, toward the bed, apparently assuming the room to be empty. Hearing my sudden movement from behind the door, he spun around in surprise.

He had less than a second to register much surprise at all.

I raised my pistol, firing almost point blank into the startled face of the officer. A hole opened up between his eyes.

My enemy was dead before he hit the ground.

As the three men came running in, I calmly tucked my Luger back into my waistband, stepping over the big man who lay prone on the floor, his third eye oozing. I saw the children's mother run into the next room to quiet their cries.

“Go,” the man of the house said to me, pushing a small package into my hand to take back to Babik. “We'll handle things here.”

I assumed my host and unidentified friends were partisans or at least supporters, so I knew they would take the Gestapo uniform and weapon before disposing of the body.

I had been well treated by this gentile family during my very brief visit; I hoped they would not be linked to my actions.

Sadly, such was not the case.

I never learned the fate of the two silent men, but I later found out that

Wladyslaw, along with his wife and two children, were picked up a few days after the incident and taken from their home, over sobs of anguish and cries of protestation.

They never returned.

10. The train

Autumn is arguably the most splendid time of year in southern Poland, but I saw only shades of gray and black each time I peered out from one of Babik's hiding places. The leaves had turned stunning shades of yellow and orange and crimson, but to me that only meant they'd soon wither and drop, creating a crunching, crumbling sound underfoot, making movement easier to detect by the enemy.

We were on the move again, heading back south toward Podkarpacie. From little hints that Babik was dropping, I had an inkling something big was going to take place in a week or so. Well and good, I felt. Better to die over "something big" than in mundane robberies of people who often had little more than we did.

Along the way, we stopped near the small town of Strzyzow, where the revolution of activist farmers took place some years earlier. It was, apparently, the home town of Jaskier and Chlendowski ("Stach" and "Kruk"), the People's Guard squadron leaders. Now they were aware of me as well. As I was soon to find out, a plan was being formulated around me, although the odds against its success seemed formidable...

But all I knew then was that I would be spending the night on the edge of town. Babik left me in a bunker that was nestled in a grove of hornbeams, while he took care of some business that he was not about to share with me.

Toward dawn, though, Babik reappeared and nudged me out of a light sleep. I had been dozing against the smooth, gray bark of a small tree. He held out a small pistol—I thought it was a toy, it was so tiny. It fit compactly in my equally small hand.

“Before we move on,” he told me, “I got a small assignment for you while we’re here—just a warm-up, mind you, for bigger things. For this one, you’ll get to spend some time outdoors in broad daylight.”

I listened eagerly while I examined the pistol.

“There’s a big farm close by, under German operation. All you got to do is lay on the ground and pretend to sleep next to the front gate.”

“That’s all?”

“Well, almost. The area is patrolled by a single Kraut. I’ll get you to the gate while he’s making his rounds in another area. When he comes around and gets close enough to you ... you know what to do. With that gun, he’s not likely to see it until it’s too late.”

“But if he does?”

Babik shrugged. “That’s a risk I’ll have to take.”

You’ll have to take? I thought. *You’ll have to take?*

But a few hours later, I was in place.

“Arouse! Get up, kid, get up,” the soldier shouted as he came up to me. I stirred, acting as if I had been startled out of a deep sleep. The soldier poked at me with the barrel of his rifle, thankfully not shooting first and asking questions later, as I would have done had our situations been reversed.

“Why the hell are you sleeping here, anyway?” growled the guard.

The German got his answer quickly, in the form of a soft popping sound, as I fired the small-caliber pistol into his brain.

Shoot for the head, I had been told. *Don’t tear the uniform if you can help*

it. I was happy to oblige. This was almost becoming routine to me. Me, the quiet young man from Straszecin, the boy who once could not stomach to watch even the ritual slaughtering of a cow.

As instructed, I ran from the fence at full speed, away from the farm and into the woods. Not once did I look back. There would be others waiting to take the uniform and weapon off the corpse. My part of the job was over.

Tomorrow, I knew, would be another killing, or another robbery, or maybe just another day in solitude while Babik was off somewhere doing whatever it was he did.

As it turned out, the following days were none of the above.

"I got all the details on an interesting assignment for us—actually, for you," Babik told me that night as we continued our southward trek. "It will be much more dangerous than what you done so far, and you'll be on your own the whole time."

"What will you have me do?" I asked, eager to prove myself again.

"First, we go on to Podkarpacie, probably lay low a couple of days. Other people who are part of this, they're already at work. Soon, my young friend, if everything goes according to plan, you're going to be taking a little trip by rail."

Babik had been looking away as he spoke, as if his mind were somewhere else, but now he stared directly at me, waiting to see the reaction his next words would bring.

"You're going to see first hand what it's like inside one of them concentration camps."

We were back in Babik's underground chamber, the one near Jaslo that he had fashioned into the bluffs along the Wisloka. It was November 2, nearly a week since we had left Strzyzow. I could tell by my benefactor's frequent

disappearances for hours at a time—and by the man’s uncharacteristic excitement and energy—that whatever was going on, it was not routine.

In the pre-dawn hours, as a fierce wind heralded an early start to what would be another miserable winter, Babik returned to our burrow after an absence of nearly five hours. He cradled a box-like object in his hands, but he did not let me hold it right away. It was only after I had been thoroughly briefed on the mission that he handed over the instrument—for that’s what it was—so I could examine it closely. He lit a lamp to give me some light.

It was a camera, unlike any I ever seen. Nearly square, about a foot and a half in each direction. It had been specially outfitted with some sort of sheathing to eliminate glares and flashes and to silence the mechanical tripping of its shutter.

I had never used any camera before, so I could not tell how this one differed from an ordinary photographic device. But I obediently practiced looking through the viewfinder and snapped make-believe photos from a crouched position on the ground, even though no film had been loaded.

I wondered if the camera had been Soviet-made, like so many of our weapons, for there was nothing to suggest the camera’s point of origin. I did know it had to be extremely valuable, worth considerably more than my own life to Babik’s contacts, perhaps to Babik as well. It was of little consolation to me when I considered that if I did not come back—a very real possibility—neither would the camera.

Extinguishing the lantern, Babik sat with me in the dark, going over the details again.

“This will be damn difficult, I promise you. You’ll be with a train filled with prisoners—hundreds, maybe more than a thousand of them. *Your people. Jews.*”

I thought of my own mother and sister. "I understand."

"There's nothing you can do for them. Nothing nobody can do. Except, for now, to find out where they're going. My contacts know the Krauts are closing up a big concentration camp that's near here, but where the prisoners are being taken—that's the question, now, isn't it? Nobody seems able to find out, not even the Resistance."

It was the first time I had heard him use the word.

"That information is worth a lot of money to 'Kruk'"—he caught himself—"to my friends. When you bring back the camera—"

"How do you know the train will be coming back this way?" I interrupted.

"When you bring back the camera," Babik began again, ignoring my question, "my contacts will develop the film, and then they'll know where the hell you were. And they will pay me handsomely for that information."

I could almost hear him smirking.

"Handsomely," he said again.

"Can I ask who came up with this plan? Why they think it can work?"

"No, kid, you cannot. I keep these things from you for your own goddamn good. Like I told you before, they can't torture nothing out of you if you don't know nothing."

No, you keep these things from me for your own good, I realized. It is true, I cannot give up names or information that I do not know, but they can still torture me. Of course, I have your name, Jan Babik, not that I would give it willingly, but I am sure they have ways. Then, if they do not kill me first, you will. Perhaps you will anyway, when the war is over, if we live that long.

These thoughts bubbled away in my mind, churned in my stomach. *Fear is good*, Babik had told me on our first night together. Very well, then. I would have no shortage of it on this mission.

It was not a fear of dying that disturbed me, I am quite certain of that. Rather, if I am to be honest, it was something I found even more alarming: the fear of disappointing Babik. Of letting him down if I did not succeed.

It was about 3 a.m. when we set out, the master and his willing apprentice. We followed a route that paralleled the road heading east from Jaslo. There were several hours until sunrise, but we had a lot of ground to cover in order to intercept the train before it began filling with its human cargo.

We moved quickly and silently in the dark, Babik leading the way. I clutched the camera case tightly by my side. It had been loaded with film earlier in the evening—either by Babik or by one of his unseen co-conspirators—and that camera, along with my ever-present Luger, would not leave my side.

After a time, we came upon railroad tracks and followed them for a short distance. Twenty minutes later, we saw what we had come for: a locomotive and at least 24 boxcars, standing silent and empty, portentously awaiting its fragile payload. Part of the train was dimly illuminated by the flickering light of a small fire on the track, built to keep the switch from freezing.

The train stood on a siding just outside Moderowka station, named for the small nearby village situated between Jaslo and Krosno. I understood I would be on the train for a day or two, depending on its destination. Then, if the train did indeed turn around as anticipated, and if I survived, it would take the same time to return.

Well, I wouldn't be *on* the train, exactly.

I would be *under* it. The plan was as daring as it was dangerous.

"The prisoners will be arriving soon," Babik said at last. "From here on, you're on your own, kid."

He handed me a small package. In it were a few pieces of dark bread, a

container of water, and a chunk of *slonina*—the back fat of a pig, salted and cut about three inches thick. Staples of war.

“This food will have to last you for two days, maybe more. Eat it slowly.”

I nodded, clutching the camera case in one hand, my food rations in the other. But I had to set down the food for a moment, because Babik was handing me one more item: the handsome watch he had been wearing.

“Take this, too. If you time how long it takes the train to get where it’s going, you’ll know when to jump off on the way back.”

I looked at the shiny watch in awe. “This is your good watch.”

“Bring it back with the camera,” Babik muttered, “and maybe I’ll let you keep it when I steal a better one.”

Which, I realized, was probably the closest to an affectionate gesture I had ever received from the man.

I smiled nervously, and with my hands full, turned toward the death transport which waited for me like a malevolent apparition in the smoky shadows ahead.

As I tentatively approached the train, I took solace in noting it appeared unguarded, at least for the moment. I counted the number of boxcars, then made my way to the center car, crouching low along the ground. Moving beside the tracks, I stopped directly ahead of the car’s rear wheels, and peered underneath.

There it was, more ingenious than I had even imagined.

The concealed wooden enclosure was about five feet long, three feet wide, just over a foot deep. Affixed securely underneath the boxcar and nestled between the front and rear axles, it was just big enough to hold a slight, five-foot boy and a square camera case. Even if you checked underneath the car, it would appear to be merely an extension of the boxcar itself, nothing out of the

ordinary—except you wouldn't find anything like it under any other car.

Crawling beneath the boxcar, I quickly found the panel which served as the door. It was the long plank closest to me. It obediently swung open as I pulled myself inside, putting the camera case by my feet, my meager food rations to one side. Then I swung the panel closed, fastening the inside latch which held it securely in place.

Only a small amount of outside air came into my hiding place. It wafted up through the narrow openings between the slats that made up the platform on which I lay. This would have to be my source of light, as well. I shuddered to think I would be spending at least two days cramped in this coffin-like structure. If I were discovered, I knew, it would indeed be my last resting place.

Pushing such thoughts out of my mind, I began to marvel at the *chutzpah* of the men who had built and attached this clever compartment, giving little thought to my own daring in carrying out the task. Someone had obviously built this enclosure during the night, as the train sat on the side rails awaiting its early morning departure. Of course, the Germans had better things to do than to guard an empty train, but still—my little hideaway could not have been attached without some degree of noise.

And then it struck me: no full-sized man could fit between the axles of this boxcar. The enclosure had been custom-built for me, for my small frame. I wondered if the partisans had come to Babik with this particular idea, or if it had been conceived the other way around.

The other way around, I decided. The partisans were anxious to learn the destination of the train, so Babik eagerly volunteered me, maybe even cooked up the plan as well. I could practically hear the conversations that transpired, perhaps first in Strzyzow, certainly over the preceding days here in Podkarpacie.

Babik: "You need to learn where the prisoners are headed, I can find out.

Can you get me a camera with a silent shutter?"

Partisan: "It can be arranged. But how does the camera record where the train is going?"

Babik: "It's taken to wherever the prisoners are unloaded. The film is exposed. The camera comes back on the return trip. What the hell did you think?"

Partisan: "And you propose to stow away on a trainload of victims being taken to their death? Then turn around and come back, just like that?"

Babik: Not *me*, hell no. It would turn to shit if I tried it, or you either. Where would we even hide? But I can give you the kid who's with me, what the hell, he might just pull it off. Here's the idea ... and whether or not the kid makes it back, here's what it will cost you..."

It was slow in coming to me, but finally, I understood how Babik was operating. He was a—what was the word?—mercenary? Yes, I had read about such people. Soldiers for hire. And I thought then, as I still do now, *what a perfect wartime vocation for a lifelong criminal!*

There was not much around for Babik to steal on his own by this time, but there were other ways to get goods and money if you understood basic supply and demand. Babik could supply something nobody else had: a small, unflinching and highly-trained accomplice named Moniek Goldner. With a plan that I could uniquely execute, Babik could command a handsome payment. Supporting a wife and eight children, after all, was no small responsibility, especially for a man on the run all his life.

Since none of the payment went to me, I realized Babik was using me for financial gain. But you know what? I did not care in the least. I had no use for money myself—as a Jew in hiding, where could I spend it? If I were to stay alive for as long as possible, Babik was my only ticket. The man had molded me into an

ideal co-conspirator, and in so doing, had given me the tools I would need to survive.

In fact, to my way of thinking, I was using Babik in return. And if this mission he was sending me on, or the next, should cause my death—I was certain it was just a matter of time, remember—well, what better way to die than by fighting to live?

Moniek Goldner and Jan Babik: a match made in hell, it occurred to me. Had to be, for surely there was no heaven.

Suddenly, the car above me shuddered and creaked, interrupting my introspection with the abruptness of a pin in a balloon. The heavy wheels in front and behind began to grind on the track, and the train slowly lumbered forward, switching over from the side rails to the main line, heading toward the loading platform at the station up ahead.

There, it stopped. And sat. And waited. A long, mechanical beast, yearning to be fed.

In the distance, I could hear the chaos of a thousand, maybe more, plaintive voices, and the trudging of twice that many feet. Coming closer, now, growing louder. Making their way to Moderowka station, to the beast, to whatever horrible fate might be waiting at the end of the line.

They were coming from Szebnie, a concentration camp that covered a 26-acre site less than two miles away from the Moderowka station.

It was a camp that had started, as many had, with a purely military purpose: about a dozen barracks had been built as a staging point for the German army. According to Babik's sources, Szebnie had been expanded into a full-fledged concentration camp barely eight months earlier, back in March of 1943.

Throughout the summer, prisoners were taken there from all over the district. Then, in October, came the remaining Jews from Bochnia, Rzeszow, Przemsyl, and Tarnow—the last four surviving ghettos in occupied Poland, from what Babik was told. Now the camp had become grossly overcrowded. Apparently the Germans felt it was time to thin the herd, the first step in liquidating the camp altogether.

So while Babik and I made our way to the Moderowka station from our hideout just to the west, several thousand Jews must have been standing for hours during roll call in the camp's muddy *appelplatz*, waiting to learn their fate. The vast majority of them were ultimately gathered together and marched the two miles to the Moderowka station. Ultimate destination: uncertain.

If I had not already been tightly enclosed in my compartment under the train, I might have seen the first rays of daylight carve away great sections of night along the eastern horizon. I might have looked in despair as hundreds of shattered and broken Jews, flanked by a few Germans and a greater number of vicious Ukrainian guards, were forced toward the station with heavy machine guns and blazing floodlights mounted on trucks. And I might have witnessed the consternation and anguish on each face as all the men, women and children were ordered to remove their clothing and stand naked in night air cold enough to see one's breath.

As it was, I saw it all, but not with my eyes. I saw it with my ears, through the sounds that enabled me to visualize what was happening only too well. It made me sick with realization. Sedziszow all over again.

I picked out disconsolate cries of the suffering humanity lined up not three feet away from where I lay hidden, their pleadings in Yiddish interrupted by staccato bursts of German and Ukrainian, spat out like bullets from a machine gun.

I could even hear their clothing drop to the ground, where it was snapped by guards as soon as the train had been loaded. "Why let the soldiers at the other end get all the goods?" said a guard who was close enough for me to hear. "Besides, it's easier to take clothing from the living than off the dead, is it not?"

I felt dizzy, disconnected.

Soon the doors above me slid open, and I knew each car was being filled far beyond capacity for any living cargo. There was the shuffling of bare feet, the shouts in German to press tighter as more Jews were packed in. I could picture it as clearly as if I were with them in the small area above: anyone who died on the journey would not even have space to fall down.

I heard the cry of a toddler. And more: the frightened, questioning voice of a teenage girl. An old woman, sobbing. The comforting voice of a man, trying to calm a female relative. A woman, screaming for a child who had been taken from her. The crush of human bodies, surely beyond shame in their nakedness. Cries of being cold, of not being able to endure the suffering, of prayer, of pain.

And from somewhere off to the side, in a language I wished I could not understand, more sounds of laughter and the word "*Judenfrei*." A soldier was cheering that there were no more Jews in the village. Except for a small number of Jews remaining in Szebnie for a just a short time longer, this train was taking away the last of them.

Up and down the line of cars, the doors were sliding shut, then being fastened in place with wire. I heard the sound of the steam whistle. A lurch, followed by a metallic groan, heralded the train's departure from the station. It gradually picked up speed. I lay in my hidden box, inches above the rail bed, watching the miles of track fly by beneath me.

I cried silent tears.

I cried for my mother and father and sister. I cried for my grandparents,

and for Moishe Rycz. I cried for the babies I had seen murdered in Sedziszow, for the babies and children who lay dead throughout my homeland, and I cried for the families and shreds of families I heard in the car above me, many still trying to convince themselves that the worst they would endure would be some long hours at hard labor.

But I did not shed a single tear for myself. Perhaps there would be time for that later.

Full daylight now. That much I realized as the train sped to its unknown destination. Half an hour after leaving the station, the train slowed considerably for a short time. I could tell through the narrow slots toward the bottom of my platform that we were passing a number of railroad crossings, one right after another. This meant we were going through a fairly large town, and I guessed it was Jaslo. So we were heading west. I pictured the route in my head: Gorlice would be next, then Nowy Sacz, unless the train changed direction.

After a time, I allowed himself to eat and drink a small portion of the bread and water. As for the *slonina*, it was never to my liking, this disgusting pig's fat, but I knew it would help curb my hunger, so I ate some of that, too. As I chewed, the forbidden pork by-product triggered another flashback, a poignant memory of my sister that made me forget, for the moment, the discomfort of my small chamber and the danger which lay ahead.

We are out by the cowshed, Gita and I, whispering and giggling about nothing and everything, about all manner of interests and concerns that effect all 12-year-olds. We are supposed to be going over our lessons, that is what Mama thinks we are doing, but the afternoon is balmy, and the waning hours of sunlight after school are too inviting to tempt either of us to bury our noses in school books, although I am making a noble effort.

"I'm supposed to help you with your arithmetic," I am saying to my sister. I am not a great student, not by a long shot, but I do have a head for numbers, and for taking things apart and putting them together again.

"In a couple months you will be going to school in Debica and I will have to study alone anyway," Gita says. "I may as well get used to not having your help."

"I will be home on weekends. Besides, I'm here now. You don't want to do your numbers, that's all."

"I just don't see why a girl needs to know them, anyway. I have more important things to fill my head with than silly old numbers."

"Like boys, I suppose," I chide. "That's all you've thought about ever since you started growing those ... things."

Gita gives me a light slap on the shoulder. "Is not." Then a barb occurs to her, and she says, "At least I'm growing."

I ignore the comment. My size has never really bothered me. I decided some time ago that if I was not going to be as tall as the other boys, at least I would be tougher. Stronger. No one would bully me and get away with it. And for the most part, I succeeded.

"Boys," I continue, baiting my sister. "You know it, and I know it."

But she is as stubborn as I am. "Like you don't think about girls. Tell me your biggest desire isn't to kiss a girl."

I turn serious, and look directly at her. This is all before I took notice of Anna next door, remember. "To be perfectly truthful, Gita, that's not the most important thing. There is nobody in this stupid village I would even want to kiss. My dream has nothing to do with girls."

"What is it, then?"

"I'm not telling you."

Gita shrieks in exasperation. "But brother, we tell each other everything!"

"You'll just laugh."

"I won't. I promise. Come on, what is it? You have to tell me."

I am silent for a moment, then I say, softly, "I'm dying to taste traif."

Gita laughs, but quickly catches herself. "Why?" she asks.

"Because I've never tasted it. Because I'm not supposed to. I don't know, I just wonder what it tastes like. I dream about it."

"Then you must try it," Gita says. Her mind, I can see, is working furiously.

"If Mama and Papa find out, they'll never talk to me again."

"They won't find out. It will be our secret."

"No," I say. "I just dream about it, but I can't really do it."

"I dare you."

"What?"

"I said I dare you. You can't back out of a dare. I'll think you're a coward."

I just stare at my twin. How did our silly conversation get to this point?

But Gita has already worked it out. "Here's what we'll do. After school tomorrow, we'll stop by Krakowski's store. He sells pork sausage. Kielbasa. You'll buy one, you'll eat it, then you'll know what traif tastes like and you can concentrate on girls."

Now I am grinning. "OK, I'll do it. But you won't tell?"

"Dear brother, have I ever told any of your secrets?"

The next afternoon, I walk into the gentile store, with Gita right behind me. I have never shopped for traif before, and I discover the kielbasas are all uncooked.

"What do you sell that I can eat on the way home?" I ask.

"Hungry, yes?" responds Krakowski's wife, a buxom woman with the reputation around town of being something of a, well, a tart.

"Do you have any, uh, cooked pork sausage?" I ask nervously. Gita can

barely control herself, she's biting her lip in the doorway of the store.

*Mrs. Krakowski takes down a hard salami. "There's this," she tells me.
"How much you want?"*

I count out three zlotys on the counter. It's the only money I have.

"Whatever this will buy."

The woman cuts me a chunk of sausage about three inches long. "Don't spoil your dinner, now," she calls after me in a motherly fashion. But I have already run outside the door, holding my forbidden treasure.

Gita watches anxiously as I bite off a small piece. I chew carefully, slowly, as if waiting for lightening to strike me dead.

"Well...?" she asks, impatient for a response.

I say nothing, take another bite. I nearly choke on the texture. Finally: "It tastes wonderful. Want to try some?"

I hold it out to her.

"I dared you, remember? I don't want to be turned into a pillar of salt or anything!"

I take a third bite, then I throw the rest of the sausage into a field as we pass by.

"Actually," I admit, "it tasted a lot better in my imagination."

We giggle all the way home, and when Mama asks us what's so funny, we both say "nothing" and give each other knowing looks, then break out again in gales of laughter...

I was jolted back to the here and now when the train ground to a stop at some switch point, in order to let another train pass. It was undoubtedly a train with more important cargo, like German officers, or artillery, bound for the Eastern front. The goods on my train were perishable, to be sure, but the prevailing philosophy, as I would learn, was clearly that the more who perished

on the way, the less there would be to deal with at the final destination.

I was quite certain that several of the people above me had already died during the journey; I could hear the wailing cries of loved ones, make out words from the *Kaddish*—the prayer for the dead—intoned in anguish. It occurred to me that they probably had less space up there than I did in my tight little compartment, and most likely even less fresh air.

Were it not for the black oiled cloth jacket Babik had insisted I wear, by afternoon my shirt would have been soaked through with urine that was leaking into my compartment from the car overhead. As it was, my pants were eventually soiled with my own wastes. But the situation was undoubtedly multiplied by a hundredfold up above, so I felt no shame or pity on my own behalf.

At some point it seemed that the train had changed direction, switching onto a track heading toward the north. But I could not be sure, and besides, my pictures would tell the story if I ever found my way back.

It had to be well past four in the afternoon, for the light that filtered into my hiding space was diminishing. I ate a bit more food and closed my eyes, trying to tune out the doleful sounds coming from above. The clackety-clack of the wheels, just inches away, became my lullaby. I must have dozed a little, because when I opened my eyes everything was black as coal.

More than 16 hours after we left Moderowka station, if my estimate was correct, the train slowed to a final stop. The doomed cargo—of which I counted myself as a member—had reached our destination. The time was approximately 11 o'clock on the night of November 3, 1943. I will never forget that date.

I reached for the camera and held it tightly, trying to summon the courage to open my cramped compartment. In a moment I would have to step outside, alone and vulnerable, into the terrifying night.

“Out! Out!” they were screaming in German. Not one utterance, or two, but dozens of shouting voices, hateful and shrill, followed by the heavy scrape of the doors above, sliding open, ready to disgorge the wretched shipment.

I breathed deeply, unlatched my own narrow door, and dropped to the rail bed beneath the boxcar. I made sure to cradle the camera case against my body. My muscles ached from being cramped for so long in such a tiny space; I tried to ignore the discomfort. I lay still for a few moments, waiting for my eyes to adjust to the light, which penetrated even here, under the train. No wonder. The unloading platform was lit as brightly as day, under wide, sweeping floodlights.

Good for the photographs, I thought. Bad for the photographer.

From my unusual vantage point, I saw that the train was being unloaded on the right side, where a wide ramp led down from the tracks to a broad staging area. My line of sight was limited to a sea of thin, naked legs, shaking uncontrollably as the prisoners were forcefully pulled and pushed out of the boxcar above me.

Looking to the left side of the train, I saw no signs of any activity. I could not be certain of this, however, for it was mostly in shadow. I removed the camera from its case, putting the empty case back into the compartment I had just vacated. Then, by both rolling and crawling, I maneuvered myself out from underneath the train on the side of the tracks away from the ramp, where it seemed deserted.

My legs wobbled uncontrollably as I tried to stand. Gripping the camera tightly, I steadied himself by extending my other hand to the side of the boxcar. Using it for support, I pulled myself up. I moved my legs up and down for nearly a minute, walking in place, until the circulation was restored. I shivered, from both tension and the cold night air. My dank, wet clothing did little to protect me from either.

Crouching low, I made my way through the shadows, up the line of cars toward the locomotive in front. I had to be particularly cautious as I skulked between the cars, but still I moved quickly, for it appeared that the entire train would be unloaded in less than twenty minutes.

What I saw, in my brief glimpses as I passed between the boxcars, was complete and utter pandemonium. The camp SS detail was getting the new arrivals off the train, it seemed to me, as if they were trying to break some speed record. Prisoners in grimy striped uniforms were also on hand, unloading dead bodies—of which there seemed to be a fair number—and helping to clear the ramp quickly. Men and women were being separated, from what I could tell, and the new arrivals were being forced into position on the platform in long lines, perhaps five abreast. People who stepped out of line to call to loved ones or seek one final embrace were beaten back with heavy blows. Several were shot. Some kind of grim selection process would take place next, I knew, from what I myself saw happening in Sedziszow. At any rate, I lost track of what exactly was happening to the frightened, emaciated new arrivals. I had a job to do.

After several more minutes, I reached the locomotive. I looked up, saw no one inside. Perhaps the engineer had climbed down when we arrived, to take a break or simply distance himself from the screams and wails that had been reverberating from the train like a dirge.

I came around to the front of the locomotive, cautiously, cautiously, until I had a relatively clear line of sight into that part of the camp which stretched out before me.

I raised the camera to my right eye and realized my hands were shaking. Beads of sweat trickled down my neck, pooling beneath my already sodden collar.

Crouching in the shadows, facing directly toward the bright artificial light, I held my breath as I released the shutter in a steady rhythm that nearly matched

the beating of my own heart.

I snapped away at several tall wooden guard towers; at the stark symmetry of triple barbed-wire electric fences, stretching around the perimeter of the camp; at a dominant red brick building and, to one side, long rows of sturdy red bricked barracks; at a broad chimney that rose imposingly in the distance, spewing a dark, foul-smelling smoke which disappeared as it rose to meet the night sky.

While I was busy with my camera, the guards and SS men remained preoccupied with their prisoners, well away from where I stood. The bullets that I half expected would cut me down at any moment, never came.

Minutes later, I was finished. I had shot all the film.

I crept back along the dark side of the train, moving toward the middle boxcar. On the other side, the unloading of prisoners neared completion. The sound of my pulsing blood pounded in my ears as I reached my compartment between the axles. Crawling back inside, I put the camera back in its case, then swung the door closed behind me.

Although I was still inside the camp, a feeling of relief swept over me. I had taken sensitive photographs practically right in front of the Nazi beasts! I lay back and waited impatiently as a short while later, the locomotive was moved to the opposite end of the train. An hour passed, maybe more, and then I felt the train lurch in the opposite direction as it began its return journey, this time carrying nothing more than me, along with the specters of those who had died along the way.

While I could not be sure the train would cover exactly the same route, or even head back in the same general direction, I had little choice. So after about 16 hours into my return, as the train came to one of its many erratic stops, I opened the latch to my compartment and looked out.

In the dim light of evening, I could see there was a steep ravine alongside

the tracks. Taking yet another chance, I grabbed the camera case and jumped out, hoping the train would not start up as I crossed between the heavy metal wheels.

Thankfully, it did not. I was able to spring to safety by rolling down the steep terrain, coming to a stop in the shelter of the ravine.

It took me the better part of that night to figure out where I was, and which direction I needed to go. As it turned out, I was west of Jaslo, and only several hours' walk from the bluffs along the Wisloka where Babik was hiding. Waiting.

I proceeded slowly. No use in getting killed now, I figured, after everything I had just done. It was early the following morning when I located the mound that marked Babik's hideaway.

"B," I called in a loud whisper—I had been ordered never to use the man's full name—"it's me, Moniek. I'm back!"

From below, I could hear the wood strips being removed, then the mat above (no longer grassy, for the frosts had set in). Out popped Babik's head, like a curious gopher, and when he saw both me and the camera, he beamed—just for a moment—from ear to ear. Then the smile vanished, and he arched one eyebrow as he regarded my weary face.

"What took you so damn long?" he asked, and I was not sure if the man was joking or not.

And while I had no idea where I had been, or what exactly I had taken pictures of, when the film was ultimately developed, it must have pinpointed the destination of Szebnie's Jews as clearly as if I had drawn a road map. Because the landmarks, I know now—the triple electric fences, the brick barracks, the tall chimney—were unmistakable.

Auschwitz.

What the clandestine photos could not reveal, certainly, was the inevitable

fate of the thousand-plus Jews who rode in the boxcars above me. I found that information out long after the war: two-thirds of them, maybe more, were sent to their deaths before I had even made it halfway back.

As for me, I felt more self-assured, more alive after that mission than at any time since my father's murder. I had proven my courage and ability (or dumb luck, perhaps) not only to Babik and the man's co-conspirators, but more importantly, to myself.

And while Babik never verbally expressed any sense of relief upon my return, I do not think it an overstatement to say that he was elated to see me. For one fleeting moment, in fact, I had the distinct feeling he might hug me.

For this is what I believe to this day: In his rational mind, Babik may have told himself it was really the camera's return that mattered; the exposed film, after all, was his money ticket on that operation. But I am convinced that something deeper in him stirred when he saw me standing there, something human and caring.

It must have been a strange and uncomfortable feeling indeed.

11. *Let my people go*

Another bitterly cold winter—my third consecutive winter without a home, a family, a roof over my head. Babik was my only family now. The irony never ceased to amaze me: betrayed by one Pole, saved by another. As if that could ever even things out.

We sought shelter during the cold winter days just as we had the winter before, by hiding out in Babik's remarkable string of lairs, as well as in wide-ranging haylofts. But one night, when the temperature threatened to dip well

below zero, we came upon a modest house outside a tiny village east of Debica. The smoke rising from the chimney told us there was plenty of wood in the stove. In spite of the warm clothing we had stolen over the previous months, the cold air had permeated right down to our skin. We could not walk another step.

So we knocked loudly on the door, and when it was opened by a slightly-built man in his fifties, we walked in right past him, guns drawn. Babik did all the talking.

"We're spending the night here, and you're going to share whatever food you have with us. I'll pay you something for your hospitality."

Babik, it seems, had collected a generous sum for my photographs. So lately he had been leaving a few small coins to help compensate for the food and clothing we demanded at gunpoint. *Was that not still robbery just the same?* I reflected.

"If, during the night, you try to leave, I will kill you before you get out the door. And if tomorrow, or any other time, you tell anyone we was here, I'll come *back* and kill you. Got that?"

Babik was well known throughout the area for his pre-war exploits, but if the peasant recognized him, he didn't show it. Rather, he looked incredulously at Babik, then to me, and back again. And all he could say in response to his armed house guests was, "You'll *pay* me?"

He lived alone, which made it easier for Babik and me to keep an eye on him. The man, however, made no effort to be uncooperative. As promised, when we left the warmth of the cottage at nightfall, Babik left a few *zloty*.

A few days later, after a short respite from the sub-zero cold, the temperatures dropped once more. This time Babik and I were near Bobrowa, and again we commandeered a house for the day, giving the same warning to the young owner and his wife. It looked to me like there was a glimmer of recognition

in the couple's eyes when they stared at Babik, though the daylight hours passed without incident.

During this period Babik continued to see his wife from time to time. The Germans were preoccupied with their eastern front, and it seemed that their concern for Babik's whereabouts had diminished. The couple usually met in the forests, where Stefania arrived by various circuitous routes and often in the company of one of her children. As always, she brought news of the war along with home-cooked food. What she took in return depended on Babik's payments from the underground, and on whether he had found anything worth stealing since her last visit.

One day in February, Babik came back from such a clandestine meeting bubbling with news. A rumor was circulating that top-secret military experiments were going on in the village of Ociecka near the Pustkow camp. Its success, the gossip went, might signal a victory for Germany.

In point of fact, we learned later that the rumor was true. It was in Ociecka that the V-2 rocket was being developed. About 50 prisoners from the Pustkow camp were being used to clean the pipes that carried rocket fuel, which had a tendency to freeze during the cold winter months.

Stefania's other news—of more immediate concern to Babik—was that the owner of the home in Bobrowa had indeed run to the authorities, exclaiming that the infamous Jan Babik, along with a young willing accomplice, had held them hostage for a day. As a result, we feared the Germans would redouble their search efforts.

Armed with this knowledge, we left that very night and headed once more to the southwest, wandering through the bleak forests which followed the banks of the Wisloka River. This time, we did not stop at daybreak to hide. There were patrols everywhere, and Babik's winter hiding places in this area were limited.

Better to push on and put some distance behind us, Babik told me.

When we reached a wooded spot that was perhaps one or two kilometers outside of Debica, we stopped abruptly. We could hear sounds coming from somewhere up ahead.

We crept closer. The sounds grew louder, more distinct: the guttural barking of German commands. One voice? No, two—dominating a chorus of more subdued voices, blending together in dissonant cries. And one sound more: shovels, digging into the frozen earth.

We had stumbled upon a massacre about to happen.

In a clearing between the edge of the forest and the river bank, I witnessed yet another horror that will haunt me all my life.

Babik and I watched from a distance, hidden within a protective stand of pines, as two German soldiers were overseeing about 50 or 60 people, mostly men but also a few women. They were being forced to dig what was obviously intended to be their mass grave. A few had been given shovels for the task. The others were forced to claw at the unyielding ground with their bare hands. The soldiers were part of the *Einsatzgruppen*, the special death squads, which had been operating in the area with increased frequency.

At first I thought the victims might be prisoners from Pustkow, but upon closer look, I saw they were dressed in decrepit civilian clothing, not prison uniforms. And each was marked for extinction, wearing the familiar yellow arm band with a Star of David. While one soldier trained his rifle on the group, the other shoved, kicked and beat the weak and sickly laggards who apparently were not digging fast enough.

The news through Babik's grapevine was that the nearby Debica ghetto had been liquidated the previous April, with nearly all its inhabitants sent to Belzec or

shot in the surrounding forests. Could these poor souls have survived until now as part of a labor force in Debica? Or were they remnants of a Jewish partisan group or groups, just recently captured? To me, of course, it did not matter who they were, or how they got there. There were just two soldiers, and two of us. I believed we could rely on the element of surprise to take them.

"We got to do something," I whispered to the stocky Pole standing beside me.

Babik shrugged. I guess he wasn't being paid to stick his neck out here. "Why should we? They're just Jews, they're going to die anyway."

The remark hit me like a fist. "I'm a Jew, too," I reminded the man who saved my life. "Am I just as expendable?"

Babik was silent for a moment, then said, "It's too late for them, and too goddamn risky for us."

But I was already thinking things through. "What we do is wait until the prisoners have finished digging the pit. Then we wait a little longer while the Krauts line them up alongside the hole. When the bastards are ready to fire, they will be concentrating on their victims, no? That's when we make our move. You go for the son-of-a-bitch on the left, I'll get the other one."

Babik looked at me in amazement. "You telling *me* what to do, kid?" he growled. "I was stealing guns while you was still shitting in your pants!"

I stood my ground. I did not care how the man might react to my insolence. "This time, yes, I'm telling *you*. If you don't want to help me, you can go. I'll take my chances and try to kill both Krauts myself."

Babik, I was surprised to see, started to grin. My guess is, he had to admit to himself that I was right. Maybe he also thought better of his remark about their being "just Jews." I will never know.

Still grinning, he said, "You know, kid, the war has made you tough as

nails. And me, I must be getting soft.”

As I think about it now, he was correct in that assessment. The traits of the uncaring, violence-addicted bandit and the sheltered, meek young boy he saved had rubbed off on one another. Neither one of us would ever be the same again.

But I did not dwell on that then. I simply looked to Babik, and waited for an answer.

“You win this one,” he finally said. “We’ll do it like you say.”

We did.

We sat tight for another half hour, until the German guards must have decided the pit was deep enough. The two guards then shouted for the group to stand in front of the long open hole. Having no other choice, they complied, seemingly too weak and tired to run, too broken in mind and spirit to care. My heart ached to see them lined up together for what they knew would be their last breaths.

Just as the two soldiers raised their submachine guns to begin firing, so did Babik and I. We each took careful aim.

I fired first. “My” soldier took a German-made bullet right through his icy heart.

A split second later, Babik squeezed the trigger of his gun. The head of the other bastard exploded like a smashed melon.

I have to admit I took particular satisfaction from my marksmanship; for once, I was able to cut down the enemy and see first hand the lives that would potentially be spared for each dead German.

But Babik and I did not stick around long enough to see the expression on the prisoners’ faces. We made fast tracks out of the area, not stopping until we were well to the south of Pilzno, some twenty-five kilometers away.

Nor would I ever know how many Jews we truly saved that day. In the

grim retrospection of history, I have to assume that many were eventually recaptured and killed. But possibly one or two or more of them made it through the war, perhaps found their way to Israel or Canada or Australia or America. I can only hope.

Still, my feeling of jubilation at freeing that doomed group did not last long. For a short while later, I despaired to learn that there were strong reprisals for the death of the two *Wehrmacht* soldiers at our hands. From what we heard, more than 50 Polish citizens were rounded up at random in nearby Debica and shot.

It was actually small-scale punishment, as reprisals often went. Any German officer with the rank of captain or higher had the authority to shoot between 50 and 100 Poles on the spot for every German that was killed. Many times, I understood, the number went significantly higher.

At the time, I remember giving a lot of thought to the consequence of my actions. At first I wondered, *If I save the life of 50 or 60 Jews by killing two Germans, and as a result an equal number of innocent people are shot in retribution, did I do the right thing?* Then I asked myself, *Suppose a hundred innocent people are shot in return—or two hundred—what then?*

Part of me wanted to argue, *what's the difference how many? I'm trading Jewish lives for Polish lives.* But then I had to acknowledge that sort of thinking—diminishing the worth of one group of people below that of another—would make me no better than the Nazis.

Ultimately, I convinced myself that to do nothing was never an option. Innocent people were already dying every second of every day, for being in the wrong place at the wrong time, for being a Jew, or hiding a Jew, for being a Gypsy, or a cripple, or an intellectual, for looking the wrong way, for being on the wrong side of the street, or being on the street at all, or for just *being*.

Still, while I felt no remorse for stealing food and clothes, or for harming those who would kill me given half a chance, I was feeling guilty—still feel that guilt today—for the deaths of the innocent people at the hands of the Germans in reprisal for my actions.

But what else was I to do? Did I have any choice?

As it was, my need for vengeance was growing along with my confidence, and with every new mission came the opportunity, directly or indirectly, to do to my enemies what they had done to me. The only consequence that mattered, I was convinced, was to hurt the enemy and stay alive another day to do it again. There was no point in thinking farther ahead than that.

And when we finally returned to our home area along the Wisloka, I was almost giddy when Babik announced that our first destination would be Bobrowa.

Bobrowa, where we had stopped several weeks earlier, where a boastful homeowner ran to the Germans with the news that Babik and an accomplice had robbed him.

Shortly after nightfall, when all around was quiet, we approached that very house. Babik took a stick grenade from the pouch inside his jacket, removed the cap, pulled the cord, and lobbed it through the window.

"I always do what I say," he muttered to no one in particular, as the house trembled and partially collapsed in an explosion of flame.

Something gelled at that moment in the back of my mind, a hunger that had been there all along but had just now been given light and substance, like an image materializing on a sheet of photo-sensitive paper. From that moment on, it would remain in my consciousness, fixed indelibly, until my own personal plans for revenge could be put in action.

12. Shoeshine boy

The three most stalwart missions which I undertook in the waning months of Eastern Poland's German occupation all involved the destruction of trains.

The first of these adventures, which was preceded by weeks of careful planning and training, would rely solely on my newly-acquired skills of deception. The operation had been created specifically around me, for it required someone who could pass as a youngster. Once it was underway, I would be completely on my own, just as I had been when I hid under the boxcar. Only this was not simply a feat of reconnaissance. This required my close personal contact with German officers and SS. *Chutzpah*, in other words.

I wondered, as I did during my last assignment, who dreamed up this clever—not to mention highly dangerous—plan. In this case, I am guessing it was not Babik, but rather a member of Kruk's underground unit—or the leader himself—who conceived the operation. Or perhaps they dreamed it up together.

For the People's Guard—now calling themselves the People's Army—had been gaining strength since the Red Army's offensive in late 1943. In Southeastern Poland, it was active east of Debica, and most aggressive from there southward, particularly in and around the forests of Podkarpacie, where Babik and I were spending increased amounts of time.

By the spring of 1944, it was apparent that the Russians were dropping weapons by parachute in record numbers. Russian paratroops were also landing with supplies and large sums of money. What's more, the partisan units all around us had amassed additional money by pulling off daring robberies at mills, large farms, breweries, and other businesses under German management. So there were certainly ample funds to pay the rapacious Babik for my services, and after my success with their camera, I imagine they were eager to use me again.

The mission that had been devised for me this time involved a worn-looking rectangular shoe shine box, carefully crafted by unknown hands. At least they were unknown to me. Babik brought it one evening to our hiding place in the forests near Blizna.

"You understand this will make crawling under a train with a camera seem easy?" Babik asked me after he thoroughly explained the operation.

"Yes. But I can do this."

"And that even if you pull this off, you might not get away in time, or if you get away in time, the jump alone could kill you..."

"Look, I could get killed doing nothing, too. At least this way I have the chance to take some of those Nazi bastards with me."

Babik was silent for a moment, wondering if my bravado was genuine. I can assure you, it was.

"It's all right to be afraid, you know," he said. "Like I told you before, you can use it to your advantage."

I looked up at Babik, fixed my gaze directly on his face, and said, "Why should I be afraid? You are going to drill me and work with me over and over again until I know the mission backwards and forwards. You are not going to send me on a mission you don't think I have much chance of returning from."

I worded it as a statement, but Babik, I think, took it as a question. And if he were to be honest, I wonder if he would admit that he was not completely sure of the answer.

Two days later, the time and place of the operation had been decided. I was as ready as I would ever be.

An unseasonably mild April day greeted me as I walked alone toward the train station in the town of Ropczyce, along the main Krakow - Lwow railway line

which transversed my dangerous little part of the world.

Ropczyce had been selected because it had more activity than the small villages in the area along the line, places like Czarna and Grabiny. Yet its station was not quite as busy as the one in Debica, a few kilometers to the west. The word was out that the Russians were moving closer every day. This meant the east-bound trains were filled with German soldiers being sent to shore up their lines along the pressing Russian/Ukrainian front.

It had rained the night before—a fresh, cleansing rain. In its aftermath, small muddy puddles collected in the rutted ground beneath my feet. Good. That meant dirty boots, an affront to German neatness and order.

I crept into the city limits of Ropczyce during the night, and narrowly missed being caught in the headlights of a speeding car carrying SS officers. Babik had decided that I must leave my Luger and grenades behind. I felt naked, unprotected without my weapons. But I would play my role like a consummate actor, carrying only the little shoe shine box, with nothing hidden beneath my torn, damp clothing to give me away if I were patted down or searched.

It was strangely exhilarating, walking through a town in broad daylight, looking to be noticed rather than hiding in the shadows. Not many people were milling about, and those who did pass me were anxious to get on with their business and draw as little attention to themselves as possible.

“Shine, mister?” I would say whenever a man passed by.

To my great relief, I either got no answer, or just a grunt in return. Street urchins like I appeared to be were common enough in all the towns and villages. Just one more impoverished little ragamuffin, too young for the work force, simply trying to pick up a *zloty* here or there. I would act disappointed each time I got no response, for that was the part I had to play.

It was still early when I arrived at the station, with nearly two hours until

the eastbound transport was expected to come through. I looked around for likely candidates, found none. *That's all right*, I thought. *There's time*.

As I sat down on the nearly deserted platform to wait, my stomach began to growl. How long had it been since I had eaten something? Too long, and it could be quite a while longer still. Before being rescued by Babik, I had known them well, these pangs of hunger, but I would never get used to the feeling. I would never forget what it was like to go for days at a time with an empty stomach.

After about fifteen minutes, my patience was rewarded with the sound of a conversation in German coming from the side of the station house, around the corner from where I sat. Listening in, I picked up enough to confirm that the speakers were waiting to board the train. They grumbled about being reassigned to the front. I hoped they were officers, not rank-and-file soldiers; it might mean there were others of similar rank on the train.

Picking up my shoe shine box, I began walking toward the sound of the voices, swallowing my hatred like bitter medicine.

My heart fluttered in my chest. I had to admit that I felt frightened after all. Babik would approve.

Turning the corner, I pretended to act pleasantly surprised at stumbling upon the two men—they were indeed SS—who were leaning against the station wall, each smoking a cigarette. They were in their mid-thirties, blond and fit, except one of the SS bastards coughed nearly every time he inhaled. At first they seemed to take little notice of me, dismissing me as they might a cockroach.

"Shine, sirs?" I asked in Polish, pointing down at their long brown boots.

"These miserable kids are a bigger nuisance than the fucking rats," said the first officer to his partner, his muttered German punctuated at the end with a loud cough.

"Gutsy little guy, you have to give him that," came the other's response, letting me know this man would be the easier mark.

"Shine, sirs?" I repeated again, this time in German, with the same sweet innocence and look of expectation.

The two officers glanced at each other with a look of surprise.

"What's your name and where are you from?" asked the one officer. The other merely glared suspiciously, until he was seized with a coughing fit.

I knew my life depended on my response to such questions. My mind raced with possibilities as to how I could answer. The scent of wildflowers growing near the pavement, an unexpected fragrance in an ugly time and place, filled my senses, momentarily distracting me.

Focus now, I told myself. Channel your fear.

"I'm called Jan," I said, taking Babik's first name. It was common enough for a Pole. "I live on a farm in Chechly, not far from here. My father is very ill, we have no money."

The lies came smoothly. Still, I was apprehensive as to where this questioning might lead.

The surly officer frowned and said, "I'll bet this kid is a Jew."

I nearly wet myself.

"He must be a Jew," the bastard repeated. "He speaks German."

I thought fast, jumped in with: "I learned German in school. It's my second language, but I don't think I speak it very well. I don't get enough practice."

The answer was, of course, technically true, for German was taught in many Polish schools. I only hoped it would not dawn on them that I was speaking and understanding it far better than someone with just a schoolboy's exposure.

While they thought about my response, I added, "If I were a Jew, I would not be here, would I? This town is *Judenfrei*, like all the others."

I prayed they would not pull down my pants to check for further evidence.

The friendlier officer seemed convinced. "This kid's a Pollak, I'd bet on it," he said to his partner. "When's the last time we saw a Jew around here?"

The other officer just grunted. Then, taking one last drag on his cigarette, he tossed it on the ground inches away from my shoe shine box. I held my breath. I watched the stub continue to burn, a bit of ash catching a breeze and floating gently upward. The heel of the Nazi's boot came down hard on the butt, crushing it into the ground.

"This brat's a pest," he said, not softening his position on the matter.

His friend chuckled. "Weren't you ever a kid yourself, Franz?" he chided. Or something to that effect.

I decided it was time to try again. "May I shine your boots now?" This time I specifically addressed the kinder officer.

"I have no *zlotys*., he said to me. "Only German marks."

I nodded agreeably, amazed that the officer was amenable to payment of any kind. I opened my box, taking out a brush, a cloth, and some thick brown polish.

Ten minutes later, I looked into the polished leather which captured, then reflected, the bright mid-morning sunlight. In the mirror of that Nazi boot, I saw the face of a boy who belonged to a group that numbered in the millions, all destined for extinction at the hands of men like the one who stood before me.

"There you are, sir," I said respectfully, as I swallowed my loathing and looked up at the face of my enemy.

"I trust they are polished to your satisfaction."

"You're too damned generous with this scum," grumbled the coughing officer when his companion handed me a small coin and a torn piece of candy. Then he

looked down at me.

“For that money, you need to do *two* pairs of boots. Lucky for you, mine are also dirty.”

I wanted to kill him on the spot, kill them both. But I politely said, “I will be happy to clean them, sir. They will shine like your friend’s.”

They did.

I thanked the two officers profusely for allowing me the honor of shining their boots. Then, in what appeared to be an afterthought, I turned to the more agreeable officer and asked, “Could I shine the other boots as well?”

“Other boots?”

“On the train. Could I come on the train as far as the next stop, and offer to shine the boots of the other soldiers?”

“There are enough Pollaks on the train already,” the surly officer snapped, referring to the laborers who serviced the cars and their passengers.

“What’s the harm in one more?” the first officer responded. “The kid’s got guts and determination, you have to admit. Willing to walk back home from the next miserable stop if it means a couple coins or a few scraps of food.”

I knew the next town on the line was Sedziszow. I had walked back from there before, right out from under the German sons-of-bitches, and more than once. I could do it again.

“You can board with us, but then you’re on your own,” the German said to me. “Keep in mind not everyone’s as easygoing as I am.”

That, I knew, was an understatement. Still, it had been relatively easy to get invited onto the train. The real dangers lay ahead.

Half an hour later, the train chugged into the station. An old locomotive, spewing smoke and coal dust, pulled about a dozen passenger carriages which had been conscripted to carry German soldiers to the Eastern front. Three other

soldiers boarded along with the two who sported newly-shined boots. One very anxious Jewish shoe shine boy followed close behind.

You're not going to send me on a mission you don't think I have much chance of returning from. My words echoed in my head. And I thought of Babik. The look on his face, before he turned away in silence.

The car stank of stale smoke and the sweat of two dozen soldiers, most of whom regarded me with disinterest. Some dozed, others looked out the smeared, gray windows with bored expressions. I studied their faces, doomed men all. Most of them surely had families waiting for their safe return. If all went well, I knew, I would take them from their families just as my family had been taken from me.

"Shine, sir?" I asked, starting with a middle-aged officer in the car's front seat.

"Go ahead, the kid does a good job," said the German who invited me on board, having taken a seat directly behind. "He even learned to speak some German in this miserable country."

I opened my box and went to work on the officer's boots.

By the time the train left Ropczyce behind and began to pick up speed, I had worked my way several rows back. Nobody had yet questioned my presence on the train, or asked to see papers. I was a nuisance to some, an industrious urchin to others, but I am sure it never occurred to any of them, at least not until it was too late, that inside my box, underneath the rags and brushes and polish, a false bottom held a powerful explosive and a crude but effective timer. I would have no more than 15 seconds to escape once I flipped the lever concealed beneath the black tin of polish that remained unused amid this sea of brown boots.

I had been on the train for more than half an hour, packed in with some of

Hitler's finest. The train was eating up track at full steam, racing through forest on its way to Sedziszow, Rzeszow, and the front beyond.

It was time.

I had just started to shine my third pair of boots since boarding the train, when I looked up at the pleasant-faced soldier who sat before me. The man was young, perhaps not more than a few years older than me.

Grabbing my stomach, I grimaced as if in pain, although I did not know if the soldier had noticed me until he spoke.

"It's my stomach," I said, in response to no question that had been asked.

"What?"

"My stomach."

"What about it?"

"Hurts. I have to shit."

"You can't finish these boots first?"

"I'll shit right here if I don't get to the bathroom fast."

"Go, then."

"I'll be right back," I lied, picking up the brown polish and putting it back in the box, back on top of the black polish. My index finger deftly found the lever beneath them both.

Pushing the shoe shine box under the forward seat and out of the way, I got up and walked, doubled over as if I had cramps, as fast as possible toward the tiny bathroom at the rear of the carriage. It was unoccupied, not that it mattered, for I walked right past it and grabbed the handle on the heavy door just beyond.

It was stuck!

The train shot forward through the forested countryside, a speeding time bomb, while I struggled to implement my only chance to escape. Straining, I tried again. And again.

Clackety-clack, clackety-clack, clackety-clack, sang the train: eight seconds, nine seconds, ten seconds...

My adrenaline surging, I gave one more, desperate try. This time, the door gave way, and slid back with a loud slam. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw several heads turn, including, I think, that of the SS officer who brought me on board. He must have wondered where the hell I was going. I could only hope that in the seconds remaining, he would begin to put things together, would start to understand his complicity in what was happening, just a beat or two before he was consumed by eternal darkness.

Clean, fresh air filled my lungs. The rushing wind almost knocked me over as I stood in the open space between the carriage I had just left and the one behind it.

The train was flying past a forest in a dizzying fury. Oblique rays of sunlight flickered between the trees as if someone were sending a message in code. The sound of metal on metal pounded in my ears, momentarily eclipsing the pounding of my own heart.

Without any further conscious thought, I jumped from the speeding train, hitting the embankment and rolling away from the tracks. I felt sharp pain in my ribs and shoulder—worse pain, possibly, than when Piatek had me shot and bayoneted two years earlier—but I continued to roll over and over, until I came to an abrupt stop against the trunk of a tree.

It was at this moment the explosion blew apart the carriage which I had just left. Projectiles of mangled steel splayed in all directions, destroying the carriages both immediately in front and behind, overturning several of the remaining cars and skittering the others off the track.

I pulled himself deeper into the forest, wincing in pain from my bruised ribs and torn shoulder. I could have easily been killed three times over: by the

force of the nearby explosion, or the carnage of flying glass and metal, or in my jump from the speeding train. This time, I did not even try to understand why, once more, I had escaped with my life.

In the distance behind me, I heard screams in German. Soldiers were trying to help their injured comrades.

Only the officers in the carriage I boarded would have understood the source of the explosion, and I was quite sure they were all dead. So without any sense of fear, I walked away, slowly and with great discomfort, eventually finding my way back to Babik and the now-familiar Blizna forest.

And as I walked, I thought back to my audacious act, and in spite of the pain, I actually began to smile. For I imagined the two SS officers who I had approached at the station. I saw them clearly now, rotting in hell, holding their shiny brown boots high in the air, away from the flames that licked cruelly at their pale-fleshed heels. But it was not long at all before the flames grew higher and hotter, consuming their legs, their torsos, and finally all of them, their boots being the very last to burn.

Babik had heard about the success of my mission even before I came stumbling in, bruised and weary, to our hiding place in the forest. It was nearly evening; the sky already shimmered with an opalescent glow.

Until he saw me, Babik did not know if I had survived the explosion, or the jump, or the ensuing search that had invariably followed. Certainly, he would be amply remunerated by “Kruk” whether I returned or not. Still...

Still, the sight of me—bruised, but very much alive—nearly brought tears to the irascible bandit’s eyes. Like a proud papa, he listened intently as I related my experiences at the station and on board the train.

“I prepared you well,” Babik declared when I had finished. “You done

better than I ever expected.” It was a rare compliment, self-serving though it may have been.

I allowed myself to smile. Although I still half expected that the man might turn on me when the war ended, I had to admit a strange affection for Babik. You get a strong feeling of security, for one thing, by staying with someone who has eluded capture for more than two decades. But during my transition from quiet little boy to criminal’s accomplice, I saw something in my benefactor that most others, I am sure, did not see: under the man’s ruthless, often violent exterior, there beat a heart that could be kind and compassionate.

The two of us sat together in silence, neither giving voice to our innermost thoughts. But my mind quickly turned to the most vexing of my many unanswered questions. This seemed to be as good a time as any to probe more deeply.

“That day you found me at the Grabiny train station...” My voice trailed into a tiny squeak, waiting to see if Babik would cut me off.

“What about it?”

“Why did you put your own life at risk to save me? Why didn’t you just leave me there?”

Babik looked down, saying nothing. He picked up a branch that had been lying nearby, poked at the ground with no particular sense of purpose. The spring air was unusually still, almost stifling. I waited patiently.

Finally, he actually responded, though his words were measured.

“I won’t deny that you been ... well, convenient ... in helping me make some money off this miserable goddamn war. I suppose I guessed how useful you might be almost from the first instant I saw you lying there under ... well, you know.”

Then he grinned, and held out a handful of *zlotys*—the down payment for

my recent exploit. "I got to say, you been proving far more valuable than I ever dreamed."

I practically stopped breathing, not daring to interrupt, waiting for Babik to continue.

"But I suppose that's not the only reason I picked you up back then. You was gushing blood, you might have died without help, and you certainly would have been shot ... again ... by any Krauts who found you there."

"Or by Piatek," I added, then regretted the interruption.

"Or by Piatek, yes, or by dozens of other informers. Look, I been no saint, I done my own share of killing. But no children. Never no children."

Babik looked at the random pattern of holes in the ground, as if he had just become aware of them. He tossed the stick aside, sighed deeply.

"If I left you there to die, the fascist Kraut pricks and their informers would have won. They must never win. What I saw when I was ..."

He stopped abruptly.

I looked at him impatiently. "When you were where?" I asked, knowing the answer, but trying to draw out my usually close-lipped protector.

But the moment had passed. "It don't matter now. Nothing matters except getting through this war. And putting an end to the running, if I can ever do that. And seeing my family again, in my own home."

"Yes, you have a family to come home to." No rancor in my words. Just flat statement of fact.

Babik looked at me, reminded, perhaps, of the vast differences between us. He shrugged.

"Who knows, Moniek, a lot can happen between now and then, and after the war, too. A lot of people been looking for me. But since you got nothing holding you here, you should get out of Poland, make a new life for yourself,

some place where you don't have to hide no more."

In all innocence: "Why should I hide after the war is over?"

Babik looked at me intently, a little surprised that he had to state the obvious. "You better be damn careful if you ever go back to Straszecin or Grabiny or, what the hell, most anywhere else in this God-forsaken country," he said. "There are people like Piatek in every village, who want to finish the job Hitler started. The Russians, too, for all I know."

The thought had not occurred to me before. The words sent a chill through my body.

Babik still had not taken his eyes off me. "You asked me something not too long ago. You asked why you had the bad luck of being born a Jew. Do you remember what I said?"

"Something like, 'that's life, kid.'"

"Yeah, that's what I said, all right. It's how things are, and there's nothing you can do about it. The war will end some day and the Krauts will rot in hell," Babik continued, sounding as certain as he had been of anything in his life. "But you, my young friend, will always be a Jew."

13. Two bridges

Not two weeks went by before Babik came to me with news of another major assignment.

"We're going to hit another train."

"We?"

"Preparations are already being made. My associates want to keep pressure on the Krauts, distract them from reaching the front."

The People's Army called it the "battle of the rails:" a concentrated program of sabotage geared to disorganize German troop movement to the eastern front.

But in the area where Babik and I moved about and hid, commanders "Stach" and "Kruk" were now being hunted relentlessly by the Germans—unsuccessfully, so far, although many individual members of their units had been killed. As a result, Babik knew, these leaders' direct military activity had been limited since February of 1944.

But it became apparent that restrained activity did not eliminate all opportunities to strike. The pipeline of money, weapons, and intelligence information had never been better. So the idea of bringing in two soldiers for hire—Babik and me, his unlikely protégée—obviously appealed to these partisan leaders, particularly, I should think, in view of my prior successes.

Babik filled me in on the details. "This job includes the destruction of a bridge."

My eyes, I am sure, opened wide. "A bridge! Which one?"

"It's near Tarnow, on the main Krakow-Rzeszow line. We can get there in less than a day."

I was astounded. "You can't be serious. Those bridges are heavily guarded. We can't get to them!"

Babik waved his arm dismissively. "We can do anything we set our minds to," he said, with unmistakable arrogance.

A grin spread across my thin face. "Let me guess: my part of the operation depends on someone just my size."

"And your speed. You're going to set off the explosives."

He handed me a small wooden box, with two wires that hung loosely from one side and a lever that protruded from the opposite end.

“What do I do with this?”

Babik pulled out a crumpled sheet of paper and drew a diagram in pencil.

“I’m going to show you exactly what to do, and when to do it. Just hope everything else is in place. Less chances for things to go wrong.”

I looked down at the wooden box in my hands. “I should have died over and over again before now. What’s one more try at cheating death?”

As with all the previous missions, this one was carefully explained and rehearsed, step by step.

Several evenings later, after dark, we approached within sight of the bridge, from a point just a little down river. I was not sure where exactly we were, but if Tarnow was as close by as Babik led me to believe, this would be the Biala River. The half moon overhead, peeking in and out of impatient clouds, helped to reveal a bridge which differed from others I had seen.

Instead of the familiar trestle construction, this bridge was supported by a single arch, which spanned the river in a graceful curve. Left and right of center, rigid vertical spandrel columns rose to transfer the load of the rail bed to the arch itself, which was constructed of large stone blocks tightly and skillfully wedged together.

Augmenting the off-again-on-again moonlight were blazing search-lights, sweeping in sometimes overlapping circles across the surface of the river. As I had suspected, the bridge was under guard. At least two soldiers, looking jaded and bored, paced near the bridge on each side of the river. We hoped there were not any unseen back-ups. Babik carried his submachine gun, alert to the possibility.

The two of us scrambled down the steep embankment some distance from the span, well out of sight of the guards. I wore a thin, dark covering over my jacket. It was made of some material I could not identify, intended to help

camouflage me in the water.

We crouched at the river's edge, and when our synchronized watches indicated the precise time that I had to start moving, Babik whispered "good luck."

I nodded, then slipped silently into the icy water. With one hand I grasped the side of the river bank as I moved along it toward the bridge. My other hand held the little wooden box just above the waterline.

Although it was a mild evening, the cold, murky river started my teeth chattering almost instantly. In the waist-high water, it took me about five minutes to get within range of the searchlights, where the real danger lay. I knew I would have to make faster time getting back, and wondered how accurate the timer was in the box I carried. While it seemed to me that Babik would not knowingly send me on a suicide mission, I had no idea how expendable either of us were to the people behind this operation. To them, I assumed, Babik was merely a supplier.

Next came the hard part. I had to wade over to the footing of the arch which was about a hundred yards ahead. But if I got caught in the beams of the roving searchlights...

Each time a light swept over the water in his direction, I was instructed to quickly submerge myself, keeping only the wooden box and my fingertips—blackened with coal, as was my face—out of the water. The box would appear to be a piece of driftwood or discarded lumber. Or so I hoped.

The first time I dodged a searchlight by plunging under water, I began to sputter when I came up for air. I caught myself, fortunately, and stifled the sound. On eight or nine more occasions when I inched forward, I had to dive to hide from the lights. At one time two beams crisscrossed, one slightly behind the other, throwing off my timing. I came up too soon. I could only hope I was not spotted in the split second the light revealed a form behind the "driftwood."

A few minutes later—it seemed like hours to me—I reached the footing on the east side of the river. Protected from the searchlights by the shadow of the arch itself, I pulled myself and my precious box up onto the riverbank. I had grown numb to the cold after being in the water for a while, but now the brisk air slapped at my wet skin. I started to shake.

I checked my watch, amazed that it was still keeping time even though it had been in the water. Babik had given it to me before we set out. This was unlike any watch we had ever stolen. I was sure no ordinary Pole had a timepiece like this. It told me I had exactly four minutes, thirty-three seconds until I needed to pull the lever.

Meanwhile, I still had to find the wire leads. And hope, in the remaining minutes, the guards remained up above by the tracks.

I closely examined the stone blocks that made up the support, nearly panicking, at first, when no leads had turned up. Then I saw them: two slender wires, inconspicuously pressed into the cracks between the stones, snaking down from somewhere high above.

I had to marvel at the accomplishment. Somehow, over the preceding few days, a small group of men who I never met had wired and attached explosives to the spandrel columns or the track itself without being detected. All for this moment. It seemed to be an impossible task, especially since the bridge was always under guard. Yet here they were, two wires, as promised, waiting in the expectant night for me to finish the job.

Setting the box down firmly on the ground, I connected its wires to the two leads which dangled from above. My shaking had stopped now. I was all adrenaline and intensity, counting the seconds that remained until the exact moment when I would pull the lever.

Three ... two ... one ...

I depressed the lever fully, setting the timer in motion. Slowly, the lever began its upward return to its apogee, at which point it would close the circuit and detonate the explosive.

I did not plan to stick around and watch.

Jumping down into the water, I headed back along the riverbank, again dodging the searchlights. This time I did not have the box to worry about. I could propel himself forward by swimming under water, staying submerged for long periods until I could no longer hold my breath. It occurred to me how lucky it was Papa had insisted I learn to swim as a youngster, spending many Sundays with me in the Wisloka until I no longer feared the water.

Papa, how I miss you! I thought, then pushed my yearning for what was no more back into its own murky depths. I needed to concentrate on the dangerous task at hand.

With the searchlights far behind me, I stood in the waist-deep river and walked as quickly as I could, the resistance of the water slowing me down. And as I put distance behind me and the bridge, I could hear the chug-chugging of a train from somewhere behind and up above, growing louder every second as it sped punctually on its way toward a destination it would never reach...

Had I looked over my shoulder, I would have seen what Babik, from his vantage point, clearly saw: a locomotive pulling nine or ten flatbed cars of tanks and heavy artillery, bound for the eastern front. I would have seen a section of the rail bed give way in a tremendous burst of light and fire, a span of the bridge collapsing along with it, as the TNT detonated in high speed waves just moments before the locomotive reached the opposite side. And where the bridge broke up like a house of cards, I would have seen four cars of the train, along with their machines of war, plunge into the river below.

I was scrambling up the embankment when the force of the explosion hit

me, the blast echoing through the night. I never looked back, I just kept running and running, my clothes wet and stinking, my lungs gasping for air, until I caught up with Babik, feeling far safer under the protection of the man's submachine gun.

Together we ran a bit further, then we collapsed for a brief moment on the ground, almost giddy with the excitement of our success.

And while I was the one who had done the dirty work, Babik had a look of exhilaration on his face that seemed to almost say, *Hell, I'd do this again even if I wasn't getting paid.*

In short order, we were given two more opportunities to do it again, although the first of these operations was aborted at the last minute. The Germans must have been tipped off about the raid, because guards had the target completely surrounded. There was no way I could get through. Babik and I had to retreat immediately. The next day Babik disappeared for a few hours to get new instructions.

He returned filled with excitement. "We lay low for a few days, then we hit a different bridge. This one you know. It's in our old neighborhood: the train bridge over the Wisloka."

I did know it well. It was a high trestle bridge that spanned the river between the village of Grabiny and the town of Debica. Right in my own backyard!

"Like with the Tarnow bridge, your timing's got to be perfect, kid. This time, though, you'll also be carrying the TNT, not just the timer. And you'll be doing a little climbing. You afraid of heights?"

"Do I have a choice?"

Babik smiled.

After a few more days, the mission was ready to go. Babik had left me alone for almost a full night, returning with a large box which he strapped to my back. I was surprised at how heavy it was. I had never carried TNT before, at least, not as far as I knew.

I was given the time that the train was expected on the bridge (*how did they know?*). I would have exactly five minutes to climb down and get away once I activated the timer.

"I'll need more time than that!" I cried.

"Then you'll probably die," said an expressionless Babik, and I knew it was true. If five minutes was all I would have, it would have to be enough.

The operation took place the following evening. Although the bridge was less than an hour away from where we were hiding, we started out early, skirting Grabiny as we made their way toward the river. Babik carried the explosives on this part of the trek to conserve my strength.

"No sense tiring you out before you even begin, right?" he said magnanimously.

I merely grunted in reply.

Once we were within sight of the bridge, Babik put the box on my back, strapping it in place over my shoulders and around my waist, like a knapsack. I again wore the same black covering over my clothes, and my face and hands were darkened with coal.

The sky was cloudy, which was just as well; it would help keep me hidden. As for Babik, again he stayed safely behind, at the edge of the river, giving me a good-luck sign as I began walking toward the bridge that spanned the river high ahead of me.

This railroad bridge was supported by four tall iron trestles, spaced equal distances apart across the riverbed. The track above was brightly illuminated and

patrolled by several soldiers on each side. A couple of searchlights were directed down into the river immediately below the bridge, but the trestles themselves remained in the dark.

Are the Germans stupid, or just careless? I wondered. I decided I could stay on the riverbank without being seen. I crouched low as I walked, ready to drop to the ground and freeze if I thought anyone above noticed me, although by then it would probably be too late.

There was just one point, before I reached the wide base of the trestle closest to me, where I had to cross an area brightened by the peripheral gleam of a searchlight trained on the water. I paused at the dark edge of the area, waiting for the light to pass, knowing I would have only a second or two to scurry past before the light swung back. This I accomplished easily, and moments later I waded a few steps into the murky water directly under the bridge. When I reached the trestle, I began my careful ascent up the side.

Summoning all of my strength, I began to climb. To my own amazement, I found the experience exhilarating; the heavy bundle on my back seemed more of a nuisance than a obstacle holding me back. Using the structural crosspieces as a ladder, I advanced higher up the trestle, hoping that the soldiers above were watching only the track and not the dark trestle itself. I glanced at my watch and saw I was ahead of schedule. There was no need to race the clock. Coming down, of course, would be another matter...

At last I reached the top, where the trestle narrowed like an inverted V. My head could almost touch the horizontal crossbars which framed the rail bed above. The soldiers who guarded the bridge were close, standing where the bridge joined with the track leading from Grabiny. I had climbed up the opposite side of the trestle, quite out of sight, it seemed to me. But any sound—a sneeze, a cough, a scrape of my boots—could carry in the still, uneasy night and give me

away.

If anything was to go wrong, a likely moment would be when I wedged my small body in between the structural crosspieces. Here at the top there were vertical spandrels, spaced in intervals of a couple feet. I sat between two of them, on a wide horizontal bar, legs dangling inside the hollow trestle. It was dark here, but enough light spilled over from the floods on the track above to enable me to work. The river was far below, but I knew not to look down.

I held on to a spandrel with one hand, while with the other, I removed the straps which were fastened around my waist. This accomplished, I pulled my free right arm out from under the shoulder strap, so the box hung loosely over my left shoulder. Then I changed hands, sliding the left strap off my shoulder until it rested securely in my hand. Now I had to move fast, for the box was heavy. I had to keep my balance, as well.

The box fit perfectly between the vertical support on my left, and the one just to the left of that. Straddling the bar on which I sat, I tied the loose straps of the box to the iron supports, then reinforced it with even more with rope which I had brought along. The box would not go anywhere, I was satisfied, until it blew into thousands of infinite pieces.

There were still twenty minutes before I had to set the timer. I wondered again how the partisans could establish a train crossing with such accuracy, and then I realized if the train were early, or late, the bridge would be damaged either way; nothing would pass for days until it was repaired. Actually, the thought of a train coming early had not occurred to me until that moment. I did not want to be inches below the rail bed, hanging onto an iron support, when it rumbled overhead.

Twenty minutes passed at last. With a steady hand I pulled the lever that extended from the box, setting the timer in motion. Then I scrambled down the

trestle, feeling light as the wind, going as fast as I thought I could safely move. My hands were cut and bleeding as they grasped at the iron support bars, one after another, squeezing hard in case I lost a foothold and had to hang on to keep from dropping like a stone.

I wondered if Babik was watching my descent. I wondered if Babik was nervous, or anxious, or concerned for me.

At last, I reached the footing of the trestle, and dropped into ankle-deep water. Elapsed time: just over 3-1/2 minutes. Less than 1-1/2 minutes to detonation. I still had to cover a lot of ground.

I paused only long enough to try to avoid the searchlight beam that brightened the riverbank as it passed. Three or four seconds, that was all I could afford; I would take my chances and hope I was not seen if the beam did not completely clear. I ran and gulped in great breaths of air, not stooping low to the ground this time, just trying to put some distance between me and the bridge.

Then it blew.

Not the same sound I had heard at the bridge near Tarnow. Different, somehow. A shattering, ripping noise, accompanied by a shock wave that shook the ground under my feet. I did not look back to see if there was a fireball, or a train on the tracks, or pieces of bridge in mid-air. I just ran.

It felt almost like being free.

The last time Babik and I headed south to the forested areas of Podkarpacie—it had to be our seventh or eighth trip—we nearly did not get back alive.

We were on foot, both heavily armed. Even I was carrying a submachine gun this time in addition to my Luger and array of grenades. I imagine I looked very much like a smaller version of my stocky partner. We were coming into an area just north of Krosno, where Babik had planned to meet with one or another

of his co-conspirators.

Then we heard the first bombs drop. Ahead, maybe two kilometers, a fireball rose in the air, coloring the night sky like blood on coal. We froze in our tracks, listening, listening ...

"Dogs," I said with alarm. "I hear the barking of dogs."

Babik heard it, too. "Krauts, on the offensive. Maybe they're sweeping the forest. They might even have some of my contacts surrounded by now. We got to save our own necks."

"Do you think they were tipped off?"

"Who?"

"The Krauts—were they tipped off that resistance fighters were in the area?"

"What do *you* think? Maybe even by another partisan."

"How can that be?" I asked, as long as Babik was being so open. "I thought all the partisans are fighting against the Germans."

Babik grunted. "Don't kid yourself. A Home Army squad would turn against Soviet-backed partisans like *that*." He snapped his fingers. "Maybe it works the other way around, too. You better understand, it's not about just getting the Krauts out, now. It's about who's going to take over when they're gone. That's the trouble with this world, kid—everyone's choosing sides. Me, I look out for myself, and to hell with everyone else."

In the distance, we heard a new sound: heavy artillery rolling into place. Babik tapped me on the shoulder.

"Better get the hell out of here while we can."

We turned back to the north, taking our time once we were out of the area, for there was no reason to hurry to a destination that might be just as dangerous as the place we had left. We followed the Wisloka, stopping only during daylight

hours to lay low and rest in one of Babik's many hiding places.

"Do you realize," I observed as we lay in a camouflaged bunker, "that if we had gone south one day earlier, we could have been trapped with the others?"

"You think someone is watching over us?" Babik asked as he tried to get comfortable. I did not think that at all, at least not then, but before I could answer he jumped in with, "Me, I believe in myself. I don't hold nobody or nothing else accountable."

"I used to believe in God, at least, that's the way I was raised," I told him. "If I still believed in Him, I could hate Him, blame Him, it might be easier. But I don't believe, not anymore. If there was a God, He would not have let all this happen."

"Like I said, you got to believe in yourself, in your instincts. I brushed aside my instincts only once, four years ago, and got myself trapped in a street roundup. It cost me two years of my life. Hell, it damn near cost me my life itself."

For the first time, Babik was alluding to his imprisonment in Auschwitz. I wanted to press him on it, but figured that would only drive him to silence. So I asked instead, "Do you think the people you were supposed to meet were killed in Podkarpacie?"

"Some of them might have been. Hell, maybe they all were." He sighed audibly. "And now you know another reason why I never joined, never became part of their group. I don't believe for a minute there's safety in numbers. Completely the opposite: there's far more danger. You and me, we come and go, farts in the wind. You got any idea how many big goddamn partisan units have been wiped out by the Germans or the Ukrainians or the Blue Police or even a rival partisan group?"

It was true. In the end, a great many resistance fighters—particularly in

my area, the broad Krakow district—were betrayed, caught, murdered. As for “Kruk” and “Stach,” the People’s Army leaders who I believe were behind many—perhaps all—of my missions, both managed to live through the war, it turned out. But just barely.

Here is what I recently found out: “Kruk” died far too young, though of natural causes, four years after the war’s end. “Stach” also lived to see his comrades in the Red Army drive out the Germans from his land, but he was murdered by reactionary Poles—his own people—just days after the liberation.

Back in the bunker, I was desperate to keep the conversation going. Babik had seldom given me this much of a window into his thoughts.

“You said that not being part of a large group was ‘another good reason’ you didn’t join. As if I knew the first reason.”

Babik smiled. “Of course you know it, kid. I couldn’t support my family if I was in a unit, even if I was a paid leader. There’s plenty more money to be made selling my services ... *your* services, more precisely ... as an outsider, under contract, shall we say.”

Finally, in a rare display of candor, he added: “Let’s face it, you couldn’t have done what you done without my planning and training, and I couldn’t have made so much money without you. Finding you was lucky for both of us, yes?”

“I’m alive because of you, I know that.”

“That’s true, you are. But never forget you’re also alive because of *you*. Because you learn well and you got balls. Otherwise, you wouldn’t of ever come back from taking them pictures inside the camp. Or from the train where you shined all them shiny Kraut boots. Or from any of the other jobs you pulled off so good. Hell, I sent you places that would have got anyone else killed. Including me, probably.”

I had to admit the truth in the man’s words, but felt uncomfortable

acknowledging it.

Why did I have the luck to stay alive when most others did not? I wondered, not for the first or the last time.

But what I said was, “I did what I had to do,” and left it at that.

14. Out of the fire

The Red Army was on the move.

In mid-July, Babik heard that Lublin, to the north, had been liberated and designated as the temporary headquarters of the Russian and Polish armies. Closer to home, the Russians had already advanced to within 50 miles of Debica. The German retreat was underway, and it seemed like it would be only a matter of days—weeks, at most—until the Russian front came through the area where Babik and I were biding our time, sweltering in the above-normal summer heat.

There my protector and I had been keeping a low profile ever since returning from our nearly disastrous journey to Podkarpacie. We ventured out of the forest at night only to steal food from the fields, nothing more. I yearned for another opportunity to strike out against the Germans, but even Babik admitted it was getting too dangerous. We were right in the middle of a great deal of fighting that was going on between the retreating Germans and Poland’s two major partisan groups—as well as fighting between the two groups themselves.

Since spring, the rival Home Army had amassed an impressive supply of arms, and now—for the first time during the war—was advocating their widespread use. From what I found out later, this was part of a large-scale operation code-named *Burzha*, or Tempest.

From a military standpoint, *Burzha* appeared to embrace Home Army units fighting alongside the Russians and their armed underground, the People’s Army.

Their mutual objective, you would assume, would be to defeat the Germans.

But apparently, that was just a smoke screen.

Politically, the Home Army's operation was directed *against* Russia, in that the Polish government-in-exile hoped to prevail over the Soviet Army in the liberation of major Polish districts and force Russia back to pre-war borders.

At the time, understand, such strategies were far beyond my grasp. I cared nothing about politics. I was just trying to get back at the Germans and make it through the war at the same time, amazed with each new day in which I drew breath.

As things turned out, Operation Tempest appeared to be a failure. It hastened the end of *both* resistance groups—the Home Army *and* the People's Army. Squads on both sides began to disband, one after another, throughout the summer months.

Meanwhile, the Red Army had pushed victoriously to the west. On August 24, the last Germans were driven from Debica, and the town came under Russian control. There, along the banks of the Wisloka River just across from my home village of Straszecin, the army's westward push stopped.

Immediately to the north, though, between Ropczyce and Baranov, heavy fighting was still going on. I know, because I was there. In this area, a fierce battle took place on September 12 and 13, in the Blizna forest. This was very close to the newly-deserted Pustkow camp and the grounds where they had built and tested the V-2 rockets.

Babik and I had been hiding in that very forest on those fateful days, and before we knew it, we were caught directly in the middle of a firefight between a German battalion and a Red Army division.

This was not just a battle of guns and bullets, but of heavy artillery—German tanks vs. Russian *katyushas*. Mounted on the bed of a large

truck, the *katyusha* was a formidable weapon: a multiple rocket launcher which, in just seconds, could deliver tons of ordnance over an area of up to ten acres. We heard that the Germans called it “Stalin’s organ,” for the terrifying howling sound the rockets made when launched in salvo.

Terrifying was the word. Throughout the night, bright fireballs of devastation flew above Babik and me in a nearly continuous fusillade. But as long as the artillery made loud and sustained whistling or howling sounds, we knew the shells would pass over our heads, heading for the front lines on either side of the forest. At least twice, though, the intensity of sound began to diminish and drop in pitch, suggesting that the shell was off its mark and would land dangerously close. On those occasions, we ran like the devil to another part of the forest.

By dawn, enough of these errant shells had turned the forest into a blazing inferno. Flames shot up into the early morning skies like eruptions out of hell.

A cleansing fire, it seemed to me. *Let it burn all of Poland, for all I care.*

Babik shouted, “We got to get the hell out of here, kid!” His voice was strained, urgent. For the first time, it sounded on the verge of panic.

“Which way do we run?” I asked anxiously, realizing how quickly the fires were spreading. The flames were getting closer now, fanned by the breezes which were blowing out of the northwest.

“Which way?” I asked again, screaming this time, still hearing no answer. I began to feel the heat on my face, hear the crackle of burning trees, smell the pungent odor of smoke and decay. I was suddenly aware that my eyes were stinging.

Hearing no answer, I operated solely on instinct. I started running, searching wildly for a hole in the advancing wall of fire. I headed in what appeared to be the only direction that offered a way out of the burning forest.

And as I ran, I looked back, expecting to see Babik right there behind me, loaded down with weapons but keeping pace nonetheless, as he had done so many times in so many places over the past 18 months; Babik, my rescuer, my protector, my teacher, and strangest of all, my friend.

But the man was nowhere to be seen.

I was running alone.

Stumbling through the dense underbrush, I could barely see through the thickening smoke. My Luger remained securely tucked in my waistband, and I carried a submachine gun over my shoulder. A shell whined overhead. I was aware of a frightening diminuendo in sound level, but I kept running straight ahead to where I thought there might be a way out of the forest. The shell hit somewhere behind me, closer than I had anticipated, and the ground trembled with its impact.

I could not imagine what had happened to Babik, or how we had become separated that morning. It occurred to me, *Does he think I'm somewhere back there, right behind him?*

But my instincts regarding direction were right, for soon I came to the edge of the forest. Straight in front of me was a large open wheat field, pockmarked with the craters of artillery shells where a sturdy crop had been harvested. I did not like the idea of running out into the open, but I saw no other alternative. Behind me the forest was burning. There was no place to hide.

Except one: on that pitted field, far in the distance, stood a solitary, burned-out German tank. I assumed it had been recently disabled by a Russian rocket. It occurred to me that I might find some protection if I could crawl beneath it.

I ran across the field, expecting a bullet to cut me down at any moment,

although I saw no soldiers. The sun, which had risen high above the eastern horizon, glinted almost savagely off the steel plate of the tank that loomed ahead. Two lifeless German soldiers lay sprawled on the ground beside the tank; there were undoubtedly more dead inside. I did not stop to consider whether any might still be alive.

With my bare hands, I fervently dug away at the earth beneath the rear of the tank, between the stilled wheels. Without much rational thought, I tunneled far enough to get beneath the disabled vehicle. There the ground gave way to a large bowl-shaped depression created by earlier shelling. I collapsed within it as the tonitruous roar of artillery continued to rage nearby.

And while Stalin's organ played its percussive opus, I passed out from sheer exhaustion.

Sometime in late afternoon, the artillery fire finally gave way to silence. Intermission? Finale?

I opened my eyes, aware of some pressure on my back, along with a feeling of moisture and warmth. Then I saw blood, sticky and dark, congealing in a damp pool all around me. But it was not mine.

Right next to me lay two dead German soldiers. While I was unconscious to the world, they must have somehow crawled under the tank toward me. Perhaps they were mortally wounded and simply tried to hide, as I did. But they were not so lucky. For a moment, I was back at the Grabiny train station, and it was my father's lifeless body that pressed against me. A fresh wave of fury and revulsion swept through me. I vomited, I think.

The bodies blocked my exit from under the tank, so I had no choice but to crawl over them. My face passed just centimeters from their vile uniforms, their puffy, blue-tinged flesh. My stomach continued to churn as the dead Germans rolled under my own advancing body. Covered with their blood, I finally reached

a point where I could see daylight.

For a long while, I listened cautiously for any words of German, heard none. I reached behind me, grabbed my submachine gun, and put it on the ground ahead as I prepared to emerge into the open.

Then I did hear voices, two of them. I froze. Words in Russian. I had been spotted by Red Army soldiers.

“Get out,” one of the soldiers shouted as he approached.

The Russian’s baggy khaki pants were covered with mud, and his entire uniform—such as it was—looked like he had slept in it for days. His submachine gun was aimed at my head as I peered out at him from underneath the tank.

I scrambled out, relieved that the victors of this battle were Russian. I was unsure of what might happen next. I could speak and understand Russian fairly well; I always had a good ear for languages, after all, and I grew up not very far west of the Russian border.

“*Hevray, Hevray!*” cried the other soldier, as he saw that I wore no German uniform. “Jew! Jew!”

I tried to stand on wobbly feet beside my own submachine gun which lay on the ground.

“Partisan, eh!” exclaimed the second soldier, sizing me up and gesturing to my weapon. The fact that it was a Tokarev model just like theirs was not lost on my captors.

“Yeah, I’m a Jew, all right, and sort of a partisan too, I guess” I responded, although I had never thought of myself as anything but a boy trying to survive in the forests. “What are you going to do about it?”

The soldier, startled, had no answer at first. Then he said, brightly, “We’re going to help you. You come with us!”

“Mister, I got no place else to go,” I replied, relieved but dazed. Then I

regarded my new masters. "Give me some food, a place to sleep, and I'll do whatever you say."

Soon I found myself heading for the temporary Red Army headquarters back in nearby Sedziszow, of all places, where I had witnessed the murder of my grandparents, where I last saw my mother and twin sister, where rain barrels once held the blood of innocent babies. Only now Sedziszow was well behind the Russian front, no longer hostage to Nazi horror. But the smell of evil, of death, was still there, and even the chill autumn rain could not wash it away.

My first night in Russian hands was spent in a cottage near Borek Wielki, along the road to Sedziszow. Once a simple farm home, it had obviously been appropriated by the Russian Army when the front came through. Its occupants, no doubt, were told to relocate to another village well behind the lines until the area was secured and the army continued westward. This time, the word "relocate" was not a euphemism for something darker.

I saw more than a dozen soldiers packed into the one-room farmhouse. Many were already asleep on the floor when I arrived in the company of the two soldiers who had found me.

Although my clothes were bloody and foul, no one seemed to notice. They must have either known or guessed at my involvement with the Soviet-backed People's Army, for I was treated with a great deal of deference. To my amazement, I was even allowed to keep my weapons.

Frequently, my thoughts turned to Babik. I wondered if the man made it out of the forest, and if so, whether the Russians gave him the same considerations.

I never had a chance to say good-bye, I thought. Or thank-you. Or good luck...

As I sat at a small wooden table and greedily ate a little food that someone had found for me, I noticed two soldiers standing in a nearby corner. They were staring straight at me, murmuring something back and forth.

"He's a Jew they left behind," said one to the other, the only part of the conversation I overheard.

It was enough to trigger my anger. I jumped up from the table and bounded over to the soldiers.

"You know," I said, patting the pistol in my waistband, "I may be a Jew, but my bullets don't give a shit who *you* are. They have killed plenty of Germans and they can kill a Russian just as dead."

The two men looked at me in disbelief, I think, and the target of my wrath raised his hands as if to say "no harm meant." Then they both turned and walked outside into the damp night air.

I went back to my food and water, still finding it hard to fully comprehend that in this part of Poland, the war was really over. I was free! But freedom, I discovered, was relative. Free to do what? To go where? I had nothing. I had nobody. As long as the war raged on in the west, I decided I would take my chances with the Russians.

The following day, I was brought to a grand house in the center of Sedziszow, accompanied by three gangly Russian soldiers whom I had met the previous day. At first I had no idea why they had brought me here, but once inside, I could see it had been set up as a provisional office.

In the main room was a large desk of heavy dark wood, flanked by a number of uncomfortable-looking chairs. There was a wooden file cabinet on either side of the desk, and next to the cabinet on the right, a Russian flag. On the wall behind the desk, slightly askew, hung a picture of Joseph Stalin. I guessed that until recently, a painting or icon of Jesus Christ had hung in its place.

I looked around apprehensively, wondering what was coming next. Then a middle-aged man entered from one of the back rooms, his nose deep in a dossier. Looking up and noticing me for the first time, he smiled, then waved off the soldiers, who quietly left the room. The man's crisp, gray army uniform was not faded and ill-fitting like the uniforms worn by most of the others. And at his chest and shoulders, an array of ribbons and medals was emblazoned like a flag. He was clearly a high-ranking officer; beyond that, I could tell nothing more.

The Russian officer moved to his chair behind the desk, and not so much sat down as dropped into it. He motioned for me to have a seat, while he continued to peruse the file before him.

I selected one of the chairs in front of the desk, sitting straight and rigid on the edge, never taking my eyes off the officer. The man looked to be in his forties, with thinning black hair and a bushy eyebrow—it floated above both eyes in an almost unbroken line, like a hairy caterpillar—that undulated up and down expressively as he read. A thick, short neck seemed to just barely hold his head above his shoulders. The man was solid, but not heavyset. Built somewhat like Babik, I observed.

Finally, the officer put down his file, and gave me his full attention. The Russian's eyes were bloodshot from lack of sleep, but they were soft, gentle eyes, and they seemed to look not just at my face, but somewhere ... deeper.

"Do you speak Russian?" he asked.

"Enough."

"I know a little about you," he said slowly.

I thought, *You may know more about what I have done and where I have been than I know myself.* I wondered if the dossier on the officer's desk had reference to me—and if so, how that was possible.

The officer smiled warmly. "I'm very happy you survived the terrible

German atrocities, and that you found your way here. I want you to know you're safe with us, and I'll personally do whatever is within my power to help you."

"How could you possibly help me?" I snapped back. "I have lost everything. There is nobody left."

The officer was silent for a moment. I wondered if I had responded too sharply to what were probably good intentions, then decided I did not much care.

"You may not believe it now," the officer continued, "but you'll be all right. You've made it this far, you'll go on to recover your life, or start a new one."

I said nothing, felt nothing. I was numb to any such promises.

"Your name is"—the officer glanced down at his file—"Goldner, is that right? Moniek Goldner?"

I nodded. I had nothing else, but I still had a name.

"They call you 'Moniek' in Polish, but I'm guessing your given name is different. 'Moishe,' perhaps?"

My jaw dropped in surprise, and I leaned forward, my right hand grasping the officer's desk for support. How could this Russian know?

The officer smiled in response to my look of shock. Quietly changing to Yiddish, he said, "I'm a Jew, too."

I sank back into my chair, letting the impact of this revelation wash over me.

"I didn't realize," was all I could say.

The Russian officer regarded me solemnly. He spoke rapidly now, in a low voice. *How long has it been*, I wondered, *since I have heard this language?* I leaned forward to catch the man's words.

"There's no reason you would realize I'm a Jew, nor would most of my comrades know it, either. Only the Fascists made our people proclaim our heritage in a symbol to be worn on our sleeves; the Communists do not. But those

who know never let you forget. I am no more a Russian in their eyes than you are a Pole among your countrymen. We are Jews. Just Jews. And in Russia that can be every bit as dangerous as it can be in Poland or Germany. More dangerous, actually, these days.”

I listened, spellbound. I did not dare to interrupt as the officer leaned forward, half rising from his chair.

“I know what it’s like to have nobody. My family, too, was killed.”

He paused, momentarily lost in some cherished memory, then he settled back in his chair and looked once again at me. “You want to hear a story?”

I nodded.

“I was born in a small village in Lithuania, and in 1918, when the Red Army was being organized, I joined as a volunteer. I was only 15.” A fleeting smile reappeared on his face. “I lied a little about my age.

“So my career began during the civil war that immediately followed the revolution. Afterward, I went to a military school in Vladikavkaz, then to the Frunze Military Academy in Moscow. In 1937—it was on December 20, I’ll never forget that—I was arrested.”

The officer paused for a moment, and I realized that I had not moved a muscle since the man started talking. *Why is he telling me all this?* I wondered.

“I was arrested with a number of other military commanders, not all of them Jews. In fact, most were not. But Stalin’s reign of terror was particularly harsh on Jews. I was released—for reasons I’ll never know—in early 1941, along with a few others. During a leave sometime later, when I went to check on my parents, I found out they were ... gone.”

He sighed deeply, and said the word again: “Gone.”

If he knew the circumstances of their disappearance, of their death, he chose not to reveal it. I assumed he meant the Germans had taken his family, but

perhaps not, perhaps it was Stalin's men. Either way, I felt a tremendous empathy for him.

Who knows, I thought, maybe I'm not completely dead inside after all.

"Anyway," the officer went on, "ever since my release, I have been fighting the Nazis. At the end of my first year I was wounded in Stalingrad. Luckily, recovery was fast. Now here I am with the southern flanks, right on the western front, and soon we'll push all the way to Germany."

The Russian got up from behind his desk, put his hands on his hips, and stretched in a backward arc, as if trying to drive away tension. For the first time in several minutes, I also relaxed, and sat back in my chair.

"It's ironic," the officer concluded, "that here I am fighting for freedom from Fascist tyranny and the megalomaniac at its head, under the leadership of yet another megalomaniac. At this moment, I think I'd rather be in your shoes, with the war behind me, and the possibility of building a new life upon whatever memories and fragments of the past might still be in your heart.

"Me, soon I'll move out with my unit to challenge the Nazi sons-of-bitches once again. The Soviet army is all I have, and it's my duty to serve her. Stalin won't be around forever, but hopefully Russia will. I can't envision a world where Jews are hated forever."

I became filled with awe for this man, who was taking a bewildered Polish teenager into his confidence and baring his soul. The last thing I ever expected was to be rescued from the Nazis and then immediately befriended by a Russian officer who was a Jew!

Before I left the man's office, I was given papers that bore the bearer, one M. Goldner, with safe passage and hospitable treatment anywhere he went under Russian authority.

My care and feeding by the Russian Army continued almost immediately,

when I was issued an army jacket and military coat, including a roomy pair of *valenki*—felt Army boots with soles of real leather—to replace the thread-bare boots I had been wearing. The sleeves on the coat and jacket were too long for my small frame—what else is new—but I pinned them up and wore them proudly.

Happily, there was no diminution of hospitality when new soldiers came into Sedziszow. These men replaced some of the others who had accompanied the ranking officer—my unexpected new friend and confidant—to the front lines a few miles to the west.

For the first time in three years, I was able to eat and sleep regularly, even enjoy little luxuries like having a bowel movement, pardon my frankness, where I could sit down in safety and in surroundings of relative comfort. As a civilian, I was treated almost like an affectionate mascot by the soldiers. They told me they were sure I would bring them luck.

And when the terrible news reached me, months later in Katowice, that the Russian Jewish officer had been killed in action during the bloody January offensive, I was overcome with anguish. Not since witnessing my father's death had I felt so distraught.

Even now, after I have long forgotten the officer's name, I remember the man's penetrant words and the compassion we shared for that very brief time in the late summer of 1944. And with this remembrance, tears still manage to well up in my eyes.

15. *Liberation*

For the rest of the year, the front lines advanced no further, and I continued to be fed and cared for by the Red Army in Sedziszow. Food was not always in

plentiful supply—we sometimes ran out of bread and groats—so I, along with some of the soldiers, resorted once more to stealing whatever rations we could find.

After a while, I stopped looking to see if Babik might show up. It was possible the man was still in hiding, for Straszecin was just on the other side of the Wisloka, therefore still under German control. Or perhaps he had been killed, that was also possible. I quickly pushed such thoughts out of my mind.

As the troops awaited the inevitable winter offensive, I listened as they were indoctrinated with stories of the many heinous crimes the Germans had committed on Russian soil against civilians. Their outrage was further fueled by the gruesome discoveries of concentration camps—Maidanek and Treblinka being the largest—which their forces had overrun along the way.

This organized propaganda effort was supported by retellings of harrowing personal experiences among soldiers and officers. Sedziszow was heaped with signs, posters, articles and leaflets demanding vengeance, and their inflammatory message, I must admit, had not been lost on me either. I grew increasingly anxious to help the Russians destroy everything German.

I soon got my chance.

The early hours of January 12, 1945, brought the kind of weather in which nothing moves. Temperatures at the nearby Baranov bridgehead were barely above freezing. Roads were icy. And along vast areas of the Wistula, blizzards and fog often reduced ground visibility to near zero.

So the Germans clearly were not prepared, at 4:30 a.m., for the incredible devastation they sustained from Russian artillery, which had been massed wheel to wheel, their targets accurately pre-registered. After just five minutes of heavy shelling, the first Russian infantry troops moved forward in swarms of mini-battalions. But the main assault was yet to come. By the end of the first full day,

the first two German lines had been overrun. Their third line collapsed the next day, just 25 miles west of the starting point.

Red Army flanks achieved similar successes, overwhelming the Germans at nearly every turn. All this news and more reached us in Sedziszow almost daily as victories mounted in the west and south.

First we got word of the liberation of Tarnow. This meant Straszecin was also out from under German control. Then, on January 17, the Podkarpacie region was secured by the Red Army, although reports said Jaslo had been almost totally destroyed by the Germans in revenge for defeats on the eastern front. On January 19, the Germans were driven out of Krakow, leaving in such a hurry, they never had time to set off the explosives planted throughout the city.

And on January 27, in perhaps the most emotional moment of all, came the news that the more than 7,000 remaining prisoners of Auschwitz had been liberated by the horror-stricken Red Army. Of the people who first heard this report, myself included, very few realized that the officer leading the Russian troops into Auschwitz was a highly decorated colonel by the name of Grigori Elishawetzki. Elishawetzki, a Jew.

Until the January offensive, I remained behind the front in Sedziszow, staying in a house with low-echelon Russian soldiers. Perhaps they were released prisoners of war, or newly conscripted peasants; I never made it a point to ask.

Whoever they were, they had adopted me, in a way, for I was not only the lone civilian in the group, but also the only non-Russian. They called me "little Pole," which I took to be an affectionate nickname. If word had spread that I was a surviving Jew, it never came up.

For the time being, actually, I felt so at ease with the Red Army, my easiest decision about the future was to make no decision. As long as the Russians

provided me with shelter and food, I decided I would stay put. What else could I do? Where else would I go?

So when I awoke one morning in mid-January, finding the house and streets nearly deserted, a mild sense of panic set in. It was ironic: for years I had harbored a fear of being discovered. Now came the anxiety of being left behind.

I ventured out into the cold snowy morning, having quickly thrown on my army-issue clothing: padded pants, quilted coat and fur cap with descending earflaps. I tucked my old friend, Luger, into my waistband. Then I wandered down the nearly-deserted street, looking for a familiar face.

Minutes later, an American jeep pulled up, driven by a ruddy-faced Russian soldier whom I recognized immediately.

"The offensive has started!" exclaimed the soldier, shouting with excitement. "The First Ukrainian Front has overtaken the *fascista* at Tarnow. Soon we'll be in Krakow. If you're still with us, hop in. We'll have Germany in flames before you know it."

"I'm with you, all right," I replied.

Without a second thought, I jumped into the Jeep, and we headed west.

Seeing Debica free from German control—it had been liberated more than four months earlier—elicited no emotion, as I recall, other than renewed resentment and anger. It was not the Debica I had known before the war, nor would it ever be. The synagogue had remained standing, but it was hollow. There was no Torah, no Jews, to give it meaning. The city could be restored, rebuilt, repainted, but her soul was another matter. That was dead forever, buried in unmarked ash pits and ravines and mass graves in Pustkow and Belzec and the surrounding forests.

I was in Debica for no more than a few hours, for my new comrades were merely passing through on their way to the western border. On this journey, I did

not leave the side of my Russian friends for a moment. Heading west, we bypassed my village of Straszecin, for which I was grateful at the time. It was not on the main road to Tarnow, our next destination along the route.

We traveled in Jeeps and trucks and cars and transports, along roads strewn with burned-out German tanks and overturned trucks. We remained just behind the advancing front lines, with the insistent sounds of gunshots and artillery constantly booming from somewhere up ahead. At night, I often saw the blur of *katyusha* shells, their fiery arcs like shooting stars against the ebony sky.

As we traveled, we frequently came across terrible reminders of the war. These became indelibly etched in my memory, much as I wish I could empty out the images like yesterday's garbage.

I saw bodies that were piled as high as eight or ten feet: lines of soldiers, sometimes German, sometimes Russian, cut down by machine gun fire. They had climbed in waves, apparently, one after another, over bodies already dead until they themselves were riddled with bullets. Thousands of these nameless men and boys, stacked like potatoes, lay rotting in the Polish countryside. The stench was indescribable: a foul potpourri of death and decay, hovering repulsively in the air. I had seen plenty of killing, but never before had I smelled and tasted death of this magnitude. The enormity of it all overwhelmed me.

Passing through Tarnow—much of which lay in ruin—we continued on to Krakow, travelling along roads packed with refugees, some in carts, many on foot. The soldiers who were with me were eager for action and revenge, so we passed through Krakow as well, continuing westward, headed toward the town of Katowice and the German border just beyond.

We came into Katowice in early February, just days after the Soviet front had liberated the city. I was surprised to see no sign of battle. I had no idea, at that time, that the Russians had simply stood by while the Germans fled in retreat

over the border, in order to spare the city from otherwise certain devastation. The Russians wanted to catch their prey on German soil; it was there they planned to exact their vengeance.

Once we crossed the border just west of Katowice, I saw large posters that had been put up along the road by troops on the front lines. Their words were carefully chosen to goad their second-line comrades: *Red Army soldier! You are now on German soil! This is your hour of revenge! Kill all Germans! Kill! Kill! Kill!*

The towns and villages in this area (which belonged to Poland before the invasion) had been heavily colonized by German civilians. Now they found themselves overrun by an out-of-control Red Army.

I shudder to recall the atrocities I witnessed at the hands of the Russians: looting, rape, plunder, dismemberment, murder, and other horrors of unimaginable cruelty and depravity against the German population. I myself had the chance to shoot a couple fleeing German soldiers, and I have to be honest, I felt no hesitation about doing so. But the heinous barbarity I witnessed all around me as the Russians shouted “Kill, kill the *fascista*” or “This is for my father,” or “Here’s for what you did to my family” was something else again. Revenge against the German military was one thing, and while I was with Babik, I had participated readily. But the murder of civilians, along with the wholesale rape of females from little girls to grandmothers—that turned my stomach.

In German-occupied homes, the Russians spared no one, including the family pets. Men were forced to watch as their wives and daughters, screaming for mercy, were savagely raped by Russian soldiers—who, after having their way, slashed each German throat. From what I could tell, the Red Army authorities made no effort to reign in the barbarity. Stalin himself, I have since read, shrugged off the rape and looting as “having some fun” and “taking a few trifles.”

Entire families who lived in above-ground apartments were rounded up and, accompanied by the sounds of their own screams and the shattering of glass, thrown through their windows onto the pavement below. This happened day after day, in village after village. I could not help but see it happen, and I was certainly powerless to stop it. All I could do was mentally record the total breakdown of law and morality as my Russian liberators did to the remaining Germans what they knew, or had been told, the Germans had done to them.

And when the Americans and their Western allies put an end to this wholesale slaughter a short time later, I know for a fact that the Russians felt tremendous animosity. Many of them wanted nothing short of the total destruction of Germany and her people.

In spite of the deplorable savagery, I confess I would have stayed on with the Russian Army a while longer, to avoid making decisions about my own future. The Russians had already reached a point along the Oder River less than 60 miles from Berlin.

But one brisk morning in late March, as I waited for marching orders with my group, a high-ranking officer came over to me and spoke the words that I had expected to eventually hear.

"You done your share," said the Russian, with a gentleness in his voice that belied the brutal enthusiasm with which he personally had killed German families. "Hitler will be defeated soon, and we can't continue to look after you. It's time you were back with your own people."

"My own people are dead." The words flew out of my mouth, as if I had bitten into a rancid piece of meat.

The Russian wasn't flustered. "You know what I mean. It's time for you to be on your own. Go back to Poland. Find your destiny. You can keep the uniform. It should help grant you safe passage wherever you go."

"All right, I understand." There was nothing more I could say.

For the remainder of that day, I bid my farewells—the soldiers acted genuinely sorry to be moving on without me—and ate a meager meal of buckwheat groats studded with pork fat. Soon I would go back to being hungry, I figured, stealing food when and where I could.

The war is over in most of Poland, I thought, but how much will have really changed?

And for the first time since my earliest missions with Babik, I felt a vague feeling of panic that seeped down into the pit of my stomach, like water eroding rock. But this time, it was not a fear of being caught, or tortured, or killed, or failing a mission that unnerved me so. It was something much less definable, and far more paralyzing:

The consternation of having survived, with no idea, no idea at all, of what to do about it.

Confused and bewildered, I headed back east, toward the area I once called home.

For the first leg of my journey I hitched a ride on a horse cart into Krakow. Wandering alone through the city, I walked along the winding Wistula River. I passed Wawel Hill, with its storybook castle that had, until just weeks earlier, been taken over as the private residence of Governor General Hans Frank and his Nazi henchmen.

Will it now fall into the hands of the Russians? I wondered, and then realized that it really made no difference to me.

South of the castle, I stumbled through the Kazimierz district, its synagogues empty and in various states of ruin. Across the river, in the Podgorze district, I came upon two-meter-high walls which were all that remained of the

cramped, filthy ghetto. A young refugee, passing in the other direction, told me the ghetto had been uninhabited for two years now. The only sounds remaining behind these walls was the whistling of the fierce March winds.

After a night of uneasy rest in an empty building, I continued south on foot and came upon what little was left of the Plaszow work camp. From what my Russian companions had told me, the camp's German guards had dynamited it two months earlier, in January, just moments before the advancing Russian line reached the area.

I wondered if my mother and sister had been sent to a place like this. My rational mind held little hope that they would still be alive; nobody could survive four years in a German work camp, I supposed. Then again, I reasoned, by all rights I should be dead, too. So was it so foolish that a part of me should still hold out a tiny speck of hope for a second miracle in the family?

For now, I decided I would follow my heart and return, one last time, to Straszecin and Debica. They were the only places I knew.

From Krakow, I hitched rides much of the way back to Tarnow. The city was chaotic, as Jewish refugees who had spent the war years in Russia poured back in. Some of these, I assumed, were men who originally fled with my father back in the autumn of 1939.

The voice in my head replayed a familiar lament: *Papa, Papa, what did you come home to? Why didn't you stay in Russia?*

But it dawned on me how different circumstances might have been if my father *had* stayed there. Papa would likely be alive right now, not me; for if not for the shooting in Grabiny, I would never have wound up with Babik, to be safely hidden in his many hideouts. I felt another pang of guilt. Then I jumped on a wagon that took me as far as Pilzno. From there I began walking north, toward Straszecin.

It was the beginning of April, and the weather, while turning more temperate, was still chilly enough to make me turn up the collar on my coat and lean forward into the wind. So I was not paying much attention when two men approached me, less than a mile outside my home village, as I trudged through the gloomy morning.

“Hey, boy,” one of them called to me. “Where you heading?”

I stopped right where I was and turned. They were both Poles, somewhere in their forties. Probably farmers, from the mud on their shoes and pants. Either that, or they had been in a hurry, cutting through the fields. I did not recognize either of them. But if they were local farmers, I had undoubtedly stolen their food at one time or another.

I remained silent as the two men approached.

They looked me over, clearly curious about my uniform. The heavysset one of the pair whispered something to the other, who grinned, then addressed me.

“I see you survived the war. Aren’t you that Jewish kid who lived just up from the bridge in Straszecin?”

My heart began beating faster. The way the man said it—was it with a snicker, or a sneer?—let me know they were up to something from which no good would come. The two men gave each other a knowing glance, then grinned again, waiting for my response.

“What’s it to you?” I replied belligerently.

Then I reached into my coat and pulled out the Luger, pointing it directly at the man who spoke.

“This says that who I am and where I’m heading is none of your damned business. Don’t you think there are enough dead Pollaks for one war?”

Given the slightest provocation, I would not have hesitated to fire, believe me. If I had learned one thing from my mentor and protector, it was to shoot

first, ask questions later. It had kept me alive up to now. Even though the war had ended here, I began to wonder if it was still too soon to act otherwise.

"That's just the thing," said the same man, glowering at me. "There are too many dead Poles. And all because of..." His voice trailed off, as he decided not to finish his sentence. Not that it mattered. I could fill it in.

Then the man held up his arms in a suppliant gesture. "Take it easy, now," he said, forcing a slight smile. "No harm done."

"We're going, you can relax," said the other, speaking for the first time. Then the two men looked at each other, and gave me plenty of room, as they briskly walked past me. Soon they broke into a run.

Is this the way it's going to continue? I wondered, as I watched them grow smaller in the distance. *Is there never going to be an end to the hatred and accusations?*

Little did I know then that in the first year after the so-called liberation, hundreds of Jews returning from the camps and various hiding places were killed by Poles, individually and in mass pogroms. No part of Poland was exempt from this renewed violence toward Jews, including places like Krakow and Rzeszow in the district where I had lived.

Even after the Germans had been driven out, it would seem, the war against the Jews was not over. Not in Poland. Not by a long shot.

My only stop in Straszecin was at the home of Jan Babik.

I had a burning need to find out what had become of him in the seven months since we had become separated, somehow, in the Blizna forest. I pushed aside earlier fears that Babik might kill me now that the war had ended in this area. It was still a remote possibility, I supposed, but my desire to see him one last time outweighed any irrational doubts about how the man would react to

seeing me.

The sun was high overhead when I knocked at Babik's door. I waited anxiously as I heard approaching footsteps from inside. Soon the door was opened a crack, and Stefania Babik peered through. To me she looked heavier, older. And more than a little startled to see me standing there.

"Moniek."

That was all she said, and in a flat tone of voice, no less.

What a strange and unresponsive greeting, I thought. *No "Jan will be glad to see you" or "It's good you're alive" or even "What a surprise!"—pleasant or otherwise.* I could see that she regarded me warily. *Maybe it's the uniform*, I told myself.

"I was wondering ... that is, how did ..." I was nearly stammering, my brain working faster than my tongue. I began again. "Is Bab ... your husband ... doing well? Is he home?"

I could hear her children in the background. Stefania looked over her shoulder for a moment, then returned her gaze to me and replied sharply, "He isn't around now."

After a brief silence, it became apparent she was not going to volunteer any further information. At least her response indicated that Babik had made it back, was still alive.

Meanwhile, something about my bedraggled appearance must have softened her, because her next words were almost compassionate.

"Are you hungry?"

"Yes."

"Wait here."

The door remained slightly ajar while Stefania went, presumably, into her kitchen. I stood waiting, wondering why she did not invite me to come in. A

moment later she was back with some water and bread. I drank the water, handed back the cup, put the bread in my pocket.

"Please don't come back here again," she admonished, looking not at me, but past me. "Your ties with my husband are over now. I don't want more trouble."

Trouble? I did not know what to make of that.

"Just tell your husband I inquired about him. Tell him..."

My mind raced with things I wanted to say. But directly, not through Stefania. Meanwhile, she was looking at me now, patiently waiting for me to finish. I wished I could read her thoughts, but her expressionless face offered me no insights. Then I remembered something Babik had told me. They were words that had stayed with me because they revealed more about Jan Babik than the taciturn man might have ever imagined.

"If I left you there to die, the fascist Kraut pricks and their informers would have won. They must never win."

"Tell him," I said softly, "that I will never let them win. The informers. Tell him ... I will never forget him, what he did for me, even if what he did was also for himself."

There was confusion in Stefania's eyes, which told me her husband would never get that exact message. Maybe it was just as well.

"Just tell him I wish him well," I said finally, before I turned and walked away.

Could Babik still be in hiding? I wondered. *If so, from whom?*

What did not occur to me then was that perhaps Stefania simply did not want me to see her husband. She had made it clear from the beginning that she disliked his hiding with a Jew. While she could not influence who Jan spent his time with in the forest, her own home was another matter. There were her

neighbors to consider, after all, and the feared Communist regime...

From everything I know today, there was also another possibility: she did not want me around because she was getting ready to change houses.

After raising eight children in the cramped quarters of a run-down, multi-family dwelling, the Babiks were about to move up the block and across the bridge to a large, single-family home. It was a formerly Jewish-owned home, at that: the corner store (now simply a residence) of Moishe Rycz, who perished when he left Papa and me to walk into the arms of the Germans.

How did the Babiks come to acquire that particular house? This is the story Stefania's children grew up to believe: After the Germans were driven out, Rycz's home was bequeathed to a close cousin in Grabiny who survived and sold it for a symbolic figure to Jan Babik because of "all Babik had done for him and for the Jews."

Had I heard such absurdity then, I would most certainly have reacted angrily. Perhaps Stefania did not want to find out *what* I might do or say if I learned they were taking over Rycz's house—after all, everyone knew how Jews stuck together, did they not? Rumors were already rampant that many surviving Jews were coming back to reclaim their property. Indeed, such gossip would keep some Poles uneasy for many years to come.

However the Babiks came to occupy that house, it had to be Stefania's dream come true. It was likely she would have done all within her power to see that nothing got in the way.

As for Jan Babik's whereabouts and activities in the months following the war, I have only conflicting statements to go on. It seems that the man did spend more time at home, possibly even left the criminal life "to the amateurs," as he once vowed, although there does not appear to be any consensus on this point.

And while I have had no further contact with Babik or his family, about a year after Stefania sent me away, I ran into a man from the area who passed on the news that Babik was dead.

I must say I felt an immense sense of loss, and my initial thought was, *One of Babik's many enemies must have finally finished him off after all.*

But I know now that I was wrong.

For the fact is, Babik's health had started to deteriorate toward the end of the war. Years of living on the run, imprisonment in Auschwitz, exposure to the elements—all this took a toll. Months after the liberation, apparently, his condition worsened. And on February 15, 1946, at age 40, he succumbed—not to the Soviet secret police, or the Polish authorities, or any of the victims he had robbed or harmed or threatened during his illustrious life—but to an even more ruthless foe: viral pneumonia.

And, it is said, he died not at all in the way he had lived—boldly, dangerously, bigger than life—but instead, gently and peacefully.

In his sleep.

In his new home.

The home that had belonged to Moishe Rycz.

Back on that April day in 1945, immediately following my perturbing visit with Stefania Babik, I continued along the dirt road that paralleled the “palace” which stood behind a high fence on my right. I crossed the wooden bridge, passing Moishe's house which stood empty, awaiting its new inhabitants. Then, instead of turning right to follow the road leading into Debica, I abruptly changed plans and continued straight ahead. After a block, I stopped within sight of what had been my old home.

There it was, not silent and empty, as I had expected to find it, but filled

with life. Someone was living there, it appeared, because a small child had just run out the front door and disappeared behind the side of the house.

My house. Mama's and Papa's and Gita's house.

For a moment, I swore silently. *Who gave them the right?* Then I realized that I wanted no part of the house, anyway. I did not belong there any more.

I never even bothered to find out who had moved in.

Across the road, Mrs. Lahowska was outside, feeding her chickens. The slanting rays of the late afternoon sun backlit her golden hair which stuck out from the scarf that always covered her head. For a brief moment, I thought about going up to her, then decided against it. *Trust no one*, an inner voice directed me.

I thought about Regula next door, but was not sure I could trust him, either. I was still bitter that Regula had sent me and my father away the last time we had come for food.

There are others living here with us now, through no choice of ours ... I don't trust them, I think they'd turn you in. Regula had been truthful, I am sure of that now, but for years I did not understand. It has taken time for me to learn that there can be decency and honesty in people, even in terrible periods such as the one that I, just barely, lived through.

Taking a final look at my childhood home, I continued walking to the northwest, not toward Debica, but along the road to Wola Wielka, where my beloved grandparents once lived. I had no idea why I continued in that direction. I had seen my grandparents lying in their own blood—could four years have passed already?—and suddenly it occurred to me, what would I gain by going to their house? I had no desire to see who had taken over their property, possibly even torn the beautiful *mezuzah* off of their door frame.

It was foolish, such aimless wandering. I was just getting further away

from Debica, where I had some unfinished business. After that, who knew what I would do or where I would go next?

There was a large farm just up ahead, set back from the road. It would be dark soon, and I felt too tired to face another two hours of walking to get to Debica. Besides, I would be more comfortable spending the night here in the country than in the city, with its chaos of Russians and refugees. I would have to spend enough nights there as it was.

My stomach gurgled, reminding me that Stefania Babik's bread and water would not keep me going much longer. Once, that would have been enough, but my recent months with the Russians had reacquainted me with the luxury of two or three meals a day.

I walked up to the farmhouse and knocked on the door. I would threaten with my gun, if necessary, to get what I wanted. A man answered, 35 or 40 years of age, tall and slender. He wore a cap, which he removed as he stood in the doorway. He used his sleeve to wipe away sweat that had collected behind where the rim had pressed on his forehead. It looked as if he had just come in from his fields.

"Do I know you?" he asked, before I could open my mouth. He eyed my Russian jacket and the Luger tucked into my waistband, then looked back at me.

"I don't think so ... I don't know. I used to live near here, in Straszecin. My grandparents had a farm in Wola. It was a long time ago. I was wondering..."

"What's your name?"

"Goldner. Moniek Goldner."

The man's face softened. The gruffness melted away from his voice. "I know ... knew ... who your grandparents were. I heard what happened."

I nodded, then got right to the point. "I need some food."

"Of course." A smile, now. "My name's Okecki. Please, come in."

He must have noticed I was hesitating. For a split second, when I looked into his face, I saw Piatek.

“It’s all right. I liked your grandparents, and I don’t like what Hitler did to your people. He was bad enough to my own people, but what he did to the Jews...”

He finished by shaking his head from side to side, making a clucking sound with his tongue.

I entered and stood quietly while Okecki summoned his wife. She was a pleasant, dark-haired woman of about the same age as her husband. Her eyes immediately dropped to take in my pistol, but her face showed no reaction. If the couple had any children, they were nowhere to be seen.

Okecki invited me to sit at the table while his wife put out some bread and *slonina*. I wondered, rather cynically, whether they really were compassionate, or simply afraid because I was armed.

As I ate, I told them a little about what I had been through. Not my activities with Babik, but earlier, how my father and I had been betrayed. The man’s eyebrows went up when I mentioned Piatek’s name, and I noticed that he exchanged a quick glance with his wife.

“What does that look mean?” I asked.

“Piatek’s a dangerous man,” said Okecki. His wife busied herself by going through the motions of cleaning the stove, which as far as I could see was already spotless.

“You know him?”

“Grabiny’s not far from here, after all.”

I sat up straight. “Then you do know him!”

“Everyone’s aware of who he is and what he’s done. Some of it, anyway. And not only against the Jews. He turned a few of his own people over to the

Germans, too. The Home Army tried to kill him once, at *least* once. That's what my friend Kolaczek told me, he was a Home Army officer. A squad came in from Tarnow, he said, on bicycles—but Germans were all around the house, the Resistance couldn't get to him."

I bit off a piece of the *slonina*, paying no attention to the greasy fat that was never to my liking.

"Then there was a time toward the end of the war when, as mayor, he was supposed to disperse clothing donated by UNRRA, but—"

I interrupted. "UNRRA?" It was the first time I had heard the acronym for the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration.

"It was set up more than a year ago," Okecki explained. "To help the refugees. Anyway, instead of passing out the donations, Piatek kept them for himself, and his cronies, and his German masters. That much was widely known."

The man then glanced again at his wife, who hovered quietly in the background. "Look, I don't think he's the mayor any longer, but as far as I know he still lives there, and if he realizes you're alive—which he probably does, or soon will—he'll kill you. The war is over, but he'll likely as not try to kill you just the same."

Not if I get to him first, I thought.

At least now I knew for certain that the man was still alive. I had hoped the Russians had already made the bastard pay.

"I can take care of myself. But thanks for your concern."

Okecki shrugged, then changed the subject. "If you'd like to spend the night in our barn, even stay on a few more days, you're more than welcome."

I thanked him, said I would be leaving in the morning.

"I don't have much, but it looks like you could use this." The farmer held out his hand. In it were five *zlotys*.

I was surprised at the gesture. Food was one thing. But money...

"It's kind of you to offer, but I will not accept that."

In my mind, to take money as an orphaned refugee was to betray my family's memory. It seemed to me as if I were profiting from their loss, illogical as that might seem. I could rationalize the charity of food and clothing and shelter. But not money. That was one thing I could never accept. Not then. Not ever.

As I turned and began to head for the barn, Okecki called after me. "It's none of my business," he said, "but when are you going to get rid of your weapon?"

I stopped and looked back at the man. After a moment's pause, I turned and continued walking toward the barn.

I had no answer.

16. Revenge

Soon after sunrise, I began the once-familiar walk into Debica. Along the way, I stole a cow.

The opportunity presented itself as I walked past a small farm just over the Wisloka River, outside the city. I spotted four cows inside a low barbed wire fence that ran alongside the road. With no human beings in sight, it occurred to me that I might liberate one of the cows, to use the euphemism of the times, and that might fetch me a few *zlotys* at the market.

From what I had seen when I came through this area with the Russian soldiers, Debica—like all the other cities—was teeming with refugees, and their number was growing daily. There was little food, and whatever could be bought would be expensive. It was paradoxical, and I knew it, that while I would not

accept money as a gift, stealing in order to get money was another matter entirely. Perhaps too much of Babik had rubbed off on me.

I had nothing with which to cut the barbed wire, but up just ahead was a locked gate, which offered no resistance to the 9mm bullet from my pistol. I grabbed the cow nearest the gate and pulled her out, leading her alongside the road toward town. I arrived at the *targowica* just in time to find a willing buyer who offered me a few *zlotys*. No proof of ownership necessary.

Looking back, the next several days are a blur to me. For reasons I cannot fully explain, I declined to register as a survivor, nor did I take advantage of help from international organizations like UNRRA.

In part, I was reluctant to call attention to myself because of my long alliance with Babik. After all, the man had been hiding from the authorities and other enemies since long before the war began. So, I reasoned, I had better be careful as well. I had been with the man for twenty months, and during that time innocent Poles had been killed in retribution for our actions. Might that not make me a target still?

Then there was one other matter: *The war will end some day and the Krauts will rot in hell. But you will always be a Jew*, Babik had said. Better to remain detached, I decided, even from the other surviving Jews who were coming into the city.

I did, however, visit the Red Cross to inquire about my mother and sister, as well as my aunt and uncle Silverman. Their home, I noticed, was now occupied by strangers, just like my own.

No information. No surprise.

Then I asked about Mama's brother from Mokre. To my astonishment, my Uncle Isaac Flam was on a list of survivors, and he was right here in Debica! Last known address: temporary housing that had been provided for some of the

refugees. I made a note of the street number.

My next visit was to the Russian authorities, where I demanded they take action against Piatek for my father's murder. I had charitably decided to let the police deal with him, but it quickly became an exercise in futility. At first I was passed from one person to another, then sent to another building entirely, from which they administered the villages like Grabiny. Here an officer listened politely (and asked me how I came to own my Russian military jacket), then looked through a dossier on Piatek.

He told me Piatek had helped the people in his village temporarily relocate behind the lines when the Russian front came through. *Yes, he may well have been a Nazi sympathizer, but he gave the Red Army no trouble. A chameleon, that man; one of many. No, there's nothing we can do about that now. Yes, of course we understand how you feel. Perhaps you should talk to someone over at District Headquarters across the city in the old section. Good luck, young man.*

I was getting the run-around, and growing angrier by the minute. I began heading for the District Headquarters which was more than a mile away, but stopped suddenly after two blocks. Coming my way was a solitary man, walking with his shoulders hunched, eyes downcast.

"Isaac Flam? Is that really you, Uncle Isaac?" I practically shouted, recognizing the familiar face.

He looked over at me and lit up like a bonfire. "Moishe! I've been looking for you!" my uncle cried. "Thank God you're alive!" People around us paid little attention as he ran up to embrace me.

Tears streamed down Uncle Isaac's cheeks, the joy of finding me mixed with the anguish of reporting that there was no word about Regina and Gita. Most certainly they were dead. I told him about Piatek's betrayal of Papa and me, and of my attempts to get the new authorities to go after the son-of-a-bitch.

“Don’t be consumed with vengeance, Moishe,” Uncle Isaac admonished. “Piatek will get what’s coming to him. As for the Russians, they’re not going to lift a finger unless it’s in their own interests.”

I told him also about Babik, how the man had looked after me and trained me to be useful to the partisans. Uncle Isaac and I made a pledge to spend time together, to try and figure out some kind of future. Then, before parting, I inquired about his brother, an uncle who I seldom saw and scarcely remembered.

Uncle Isaac began to shake uncontrollably. “It was all so stupid,” he sobbed. “So damned unnecessary! He lived through the hideous war, hiding in the forests, as I did. He never let the Germans find him; for four years, he suffered and hid and lived, by luck and sheer force of will, to see the Germans driven out and sent to hell.”

I did not understand. “What happened?”

“He didn’t know the Germans were gone completely. How could he know? My brother remained hidden in a bunker, in the forest. A friend tells me this, he saw it from a short distance away, with his own eyes. A group of Red Army soldiers come across the bunker, can tell someone’s hiding inside. They order him out, he doesn’t respond. They shout again, in Russian, of course, ‘Get out, get out *now*, hands in the air.’ They don’t know who’s in there, a Jew, a German, a Home Army soldier ... my brother, he doesn’t understand, he’s afraid. Maybe it’s a trick, maybe—who knows what the hell he’s thinking? ‘Get out,’ they holler one last time, still they’re ignored, so what can they do? They fire a hail of bullets into the bunker. They got him out, all right.”

“My God,” I replied in a barely audible voice, and in hearing my own words, thought: *How can God let this happen? How is it possible?*

Uncle Isaac was silent for a moment, then regained his composure. “So you see,” he concluded, “three in our family lived through the war. But now only two

of us are left, as far as we know. You be careful, Moishe. Don't do anything foolish. I don't want to lose you, too, now that I've found you."

I nodded half-heartedly, and promised to come by my uncle's apartment in the next few days. But for now, I continued on my way to the District Headquarters building.

It had not even occurred to me, not then, that I had never asked where my uncle had been hiding, or how he managed to survive the war.

"I can't help you," said a dour officer with the Soviet secret police. I had found my way to the run-down office of the damp, dingy old building that served as District Headquarters.

Needless to say, I was livid. "You guys send me running around the city, from one place to another, and meanwhile the man who killed my father is walking around free!" I was on the edge of my chair, almost shouting.

"What are you complaining about?" said the officer. "He's free, that's true, but so are you. You finally *can* run around the city, go from place to place. Isn't that enough for you?"

But I heard it as "isn't that enough for *you people*?" and it took great self-restraint to keep from leaping up at the man and grabbing him by the throat.

I waited a moment to calm down, then: "My freedom doesn't mean anything as long as that *momzer* is alive. If *you* people don't do anything about it, I will do it myself."

The Russian got up from behind his desk and walked over to me. He leaned against the edge of his desk, and tried to reason with me.

"Look, the war's over," he said wearily. "You can't just run around killing people."

I let the comment pass, although I thought, *Your comrades sure as hell*

didn't agree with you when they followed the front lines into Germany. And they didn't agree with you, from what I have heard, when they rounded up thousands of Home Army leaders here and either shot them or sent them to Russian POW camps.

But what I said was, "What would you do?"

The Russian looked away, as if thinking it over. Then he turned back to me and replied, "I feel for you, I really do. There's just nothing we can do about this man in Grabiny. And if you're smart, there's nothing you will do either. Forget the past."

The urge to cut the man down, perhaps snap his neck, came over me again. But I turned toward the door.

"Thank you for your time," I said with venom in my voice.

I left the drab building as the afternoon sun filtered down through a hazy veil of sky. A chill breeze was blowing, and it felt good to breathe fresh air after nearly an hour in that musty old place.

Forget the past reverberated through my mind, over and over, like an endless recording on a victrola that was turning too slowly.

Like hell I will, I said to myself. *As if I ever could.*

I made no effort to look at people on the street as I walked, but I did overhear snippets of their conversations. The talk was about the Russian and Allied victories in the east. The forces were just outside Berlin. Within days, it appeared, the war would be over throughout Europe.

But the war was not yet over for me, and I realized I should have known better than to expect help from anyone else. Very well, I would handle this unfinished business myself. I would do it now, tonight, while the need burned white hot within me.

I had an appointment to keep with an old family friend.

I found it exhausting to trudge once more across the Wisloka, this time just south of Straszecin directly toward the village of Grabiny. What I was determined to do, had to be done at night; there would be time to sleep when it was over. And when it was over, I realized, I would have nothing more to do, no place really to go. My favorite uncle had survived, at least, I was grateful for that. Well, sooner or later I would find some direction, I supposed.

Each step of the way, I relived the night when Papa and I sat bound to our chairs in Piatek's kitchen. I could still see my father's despair, feel his fury. *I trusted you with my life. With my son's life. And this is what you do?* And the next morning, at the train station: Piatek's lack of feeling for human life, his utter disdain for any sense of morality. *Just do your job and kill the damn Jews. Kill them like all the others, and be done with it.*

I shuddered as I saw Piatek's house up ahead, illuminated by a nearly full moon in a clear sky. Nothing had changed. Even the siding on the side corner remained loose, as if nailing it back in place required too much effort. The barn in back looked like it had been destroyed, maybe when the Russian front came through. But the house was still there. In one room a lamp was burning. I could see it flickering through a side window.

I worked quickly. I had two RG-42 grenades—the Soviet-made “oil cans”—in the pouch within lining of my jacket. I removed the first one and pulled the pin, squeezing the handle to keep it from detonating until I released it.

“This is for my father,” I said aloud, the same way the Russians had shouted as they sought their vengeance in Upper Silesia.

I moved to the front of the house, stood directly before the window. I threw the grenade. Glass shattered. The grenade dropped to the floor inside. I ran to the side of the house, pulled the pin on my second grenade, and sent it

flying through that window, too, into the room lit by the lamp.

The explosions, one just after the other, shook the ground beneath my feet. I could feel the heat of the resulting fire on my back as I ran from the house, from Grabiny, from the ugly need for revenge that had driven me there.

At that moment, if I am to be honest, I no longer cared about Piatek's house, or who might be inside it. If Piatek was not home, so be it. If, on the other hand, the man's family was injured, well, that would be an eye for an eye, would it not? It seemed to me—at least it did then—that I could wash any blood off my hands as easily as I might clean away a streak of mud.

Washing away any remorse that would eventually settle deeper within me, however, would prove to be another matter entirely.

On the second day following my attack on the house in Grabiny, I was arrested.

I was picked up on the street in Debica by the Russian secret police and put behind bars in an old building, not far from the *cheder* I attended as a boy. It was a dank, foul-smelling cell, redolent of sweat and urine: the collective ripeness of human beings kept in captivity by Poles, then Germans, and now Russians.

The irony did not escape me: for four years, I had evaded capture by the Germans, only to be caught and imprisoned by Russians who had befriended me. All for an act I committed myself only after the authorities refused. Of course, it was those earlier efforts to goad the Russians into taking action that led them directly to me.

They put me in a cell by myself, taking my military jacket and remaining weapon—the Luger and several rounds of ammunition. They would not or could not give me any information as to the length or nature of my incarceration. It looked as though my luck had finally run out.

“Why did you arrest me? The man killed my father!” I screamed to the

agents who brought me in.

They were unmoved. "Because you committed a criminal act, whether you think so or not. The war is over, yet you're running around throwing grenades. There's been enough lawlessness here. It's time we had some respect for authority."

"Who ordered my arrest?"

No answer.

"What am I accused of doing?"

"You know what you did. By the way, the man you were after, he wasn't home. He was out playing cards, we found out. Playing cards, can you believe it? At a friend's house."

So I didn't get him after all, I said to myself. Then aloud: "Well, I gave him something to come home to, that's for sure."

"You did that," replied the guard as he slammed the cell door shut on me. "You most certainly did that."

For 14 days I languished in my prison cell. I was given bread and water, but little else. No word was forthcoming as to what the Russians planned to do with me, no contact was allowed with anyone except the guards who brought food twice a day.

I did not inquire whether Piatek had a wife or other family at home the night I paid my visit, and no one volunteered the extent of the damage I caused, either to property or people. I chose not to ask because I had convinced myself that I really did not care.

On the 15th day of my imprisonment, I was released.

"There's someone here who wants to speak with you," said the guard who unlocked my cell.

"What is there to talk about?" I asked, not hiding the insolence I felt.

The guard merely said, "Maybe you'd rather not go free?"

Free! My inclination was to jump for joy. But still I was wary. What would anyone possibly want to talk to me about?

I was given back my clothes, including my Russian military jacket, and led to an office one floor above the holding cells.

It was like every other administrative office I had been in: gloomy and musty, sparsely furnished. Other than two chairs and a cabinet, the main piece of furniture was a plain cluttered table which served as a desk. Behind it, a Pole once sat, then a German, and now, a Russian.

I paid no attention to the name on the door. But the man behind the desk was another matter. He appeared to be with the secret police, and cut an imposing figure, with his tall, athletic build and light brown hair that lay in an unruly tangle above his thin face. He looked to be about 30, no more, judging by his smooth, youthful face. He motioned for me to sit down.

"I know all about you, Mr. Goldner," he said, speaking slowly in Russian. Surprisingly, his voice was not harsh.

I could not recall ever being called "Mr. Goldner" before. That was my father's name.

"If you know so much about me, you can tell me who had me arrested. And why."

"The 'who,' I don't know."

The Russian, I am sure, saw the skepticism on my face.

"I can assure you I had nothing to do with it. I only found out about you a few days ago. As for the 'why' ... well, the war is over, Mr. Goldner."

"So I've been hearing."

The officer got up from behind his desk. The man stood six-feet-two, at least. He walked over to where I was sitting, then took the empty chair beside me.

“Your uncle was here a week or so ago. Isaac, his name is?”

I gasped audibly. *How did my uncle find out I was here?* I wondered.

“Luckily, he wound up talking to me and not to someone else,” the officer continued. “He told me what you’ve been through.”

“He knows very little about what I have been through.”

“What he told me was appalling enough.”

The Russian was silent for a moment, then: “Look, taking the law into your own hands wasn’t the answer, but you’ve suffered enough without spending who knows how long in one of our cells. I was able to ... take care of things. You’ll be free to leave in a moment.”

I did not know how to respond.

The officer got up and walked back behind his desk, opened a small drawer, reached in. I could not believe my eyes—the man took out my Luger and ammunition.

“I believe these are yours,” said the Russian. He held them out to me. “The man you were after—he’s looking to get you, I understand, and he’s got friends eager to help him. Do yourself a favor, get out of this area. You’ve had your revenge. Don’t give him his.”

“Let me see if I understand. If Piatek succeeds in killing me after all these years ... *then* maybe you’ll arrest him?”

The Russian shrugged.

I stood and put the cartridges inside my jacket, but held on to the Luger. An old friend, back again. Then I looked at the officer. “You trust me not to use this on you right now?”

“I said I knew all about you. That also means I know you’re not stupid.”

He interlocked his fingers, cracked his knuckles, then walked to within inches of where I stood. Then he added, "Besides, why would you want to kill another Jew?"

You could have knocked me over with a chicken feather. A second time!

"Like I said, it was lucky your uncle wound up talking to me. By the way, he asked me to give you this." He reached back and fished a scrap of paper out from under some files on his desk. "He left this past week for Katowice. At the time we didn't know how much longer you would be ... staying with us. Here's an address he wrote down for you. Said for you to meet him there."

"I came back here from Katowice, and now you're telling me to go back again? What would I do there?"

The officer glanced past me to the door and the empty hallway beyond. Then he said to me, in a low voice, "I know what to do. Look, I can't talk here. Where can I meet you, say, tomorrow night?"

I thought it over. I was not sure I trusted this Russian yet, but if the man really was a Jew ...

"The *targowica*," I suggested.

The Russian looked at me blankly. He was a relative newcomer to this town. I gave him directions to the cattle market, and we agreed on 9 p.m. It would be empty then. I could watch the Russian approach, assess the situation from a hidden vantage point. I could not imagine what the man had in mind, but what the hell, I had nothing more to lose by finding out.

"I don't like being called Mr. Goldner," I told the plainly-dressed Russian officer in the shadowy confines of a deserted animal pen.

"All right, Moishe, then."

Moishe. It was good to hear my given name again.

"And you may call me *friend*. I'd prefer it if you'd forget my name," said the Russian.

The forgetting, I knew, was easy. It was the remembering that would follow me the rest of my life.

I got right to the point. "You said you knew what to do. What do you have in mind ... friend?"

The Russian, I think, liked my boldness. "I can see why you made it through the war," he remarked. "What I have in mind is a journey. An escape. A new life."

"To where?"

"Berlin. Not now, but soon. To the American sector, once it's set up. From there, to Germany's American zone and ultimately, to Palestine."

My head was swimming. "I don't understand. Berlin?"

The Russian smiled. "Germany has surrendered to the Red Army. Haven't you heard? Two days ago, it happened. Eastern Germany is fully under Russian control, and that includes all of Berlin, or what's left of it. But there's word that the city will be divided between the major powers, just as they'll divide the rest of Germany. The Americans should be in Berlin next month. July or August, at the latest.

"What about Hitler?" I asked. I had not heard the news.

"Dead for over a week, may he rot in hell. Unfortunately, Stalin is alive and stronger than ever."

Now things were fitting into place. I remembered fragments of an earlier conversation, with an even higher-ranking Russian officer. *Here I am fighting for freedom from Fascist tyranny and the megalomaniac at its head, under the leadership of yet another megalomaniac. At this moment, I think I'd rather be in your shoes.*

"You're planning to escape from Stalin?" I asked. But it was more of a statement than a question.

"Stalin..." the Russian said the word bitterly, as if it were poison. "It's a name he gave to himself. Do you know that Russian word, 'Stalin?' It means 'man of steel.' Imagine the arrogance of that bastard! Believe me, Hitler has nothing on him when it comes to Jew-hating. But then, Stalin hates nearly everyone, including his own people. Did you know that repatriated Russian POW's are being killed on his orders—because they surrendered, rather than died in battle? Or that liberated Russian civilians—even those freed from German concentration camps—are being sent to Siberia? Then there were Stalin's friends who helped him rise to power. He killed them all, can you imagine? Killed his own friends."

"Yes," I replied bitterly. "That is something I can imagine only too well."

We both looked away toward the darkness, then after a moment the Russian spoke again.

"Then imagine this: sitting at a dinner table, not being able to carry on a normal conversation. In Russia, there are spies everywhere. A child might leave the house, repeat some idle mealtime chatter, and the whole family winds up being sent to the Gulag. It happens all the time. It will happen here."

I kicked at the dirt with my boot. I did not for a moment doubt what I was hearing.

"You see, Moishe," concluded the officer, "neither one of us can feel at ease the way things are. Back in Russia, nothing will change. And while Stalin supposedly promised free elections in Poland, you mark my words, nothing will change here, either. We're Jews, Moishe. The only place for us is in Palestine. And the only way we can get to Palestine is to get out from under Stalin. Are you with me?"

Palestine. Finally, a new direction, perhaps even a sense of purpose, to my

life. No more aimless wandering, I realized, not after this one final mission, a mission not to destroy, this time, but to escape all the destruction. The Russian was clearly educated, highly intelligent ... *how could I go wrong following such a person?*

“Friend, I’m with you, all right,” I replied. “Just tell me when and where, and I will be there. You are right, there is nothing in this part of the world for me anymore.”

Palestine!

17. Flight to Berlin

It was early in July when I left Poland behind for good, stepping back onto German soil under Russian authority. The first step in my search for a country to call my own.

I had left Debica within days of meeting my new Russian friend, exercising great precautions until I was far west of Piatek’s possible sphere of influence. I was pretty sure everyone had given that bastard too much credit, but I did not care to find out.

Along the journey, burned-out tanks and transport vehicles still lay helter-skelter by the side of the road. The stacks of bodies I had seen when I followed the Red Army on my last trip west were gone now, plowed into the earth, all nationalities and political alliances equal in death.

I slept wherever I could, demanded food whenever I felt hungry. My Luger, visibly tucked inside my waistband, served me well as an unspoken threat. I cared little about the consequences of resorting to violence should that prove necessary. Or so I had convinced myself.

The reunion with my Uncle Isaac was a joyous one, and the companionship of a family member made Katowice seem far less foreboding this time around. I had to hand it to my uncle—he was not living in squalor like many other refugees. His address turned out to be a modern apartment that had been abandoned by its former German owners, then taken over by two female Jewish survivors. Their women's touch showed. The interior had been fixed up and made absolutely beautiful, I thought, complete with linens, respectable silverware, even a delicate vase they kept filled with fresh flowers.

How my uncle finagled this living arrangement, I did not know. I felt it would be rude to ask, although I had my suspicions. One of the women was about my uncle's age, and Isaac, I had come to realize, had always been a ladies' man. The other woman was much younger, though still a few years older than me. The two women had found each other, somehow, and Uncle Isaac had found them both.

I was even more astounded to learn my uncle had a *second* apartment, which he kept for himself. There had been empty apartments scattered throughout the city, each hastily deserted by German families who either fled or were executed as the Russians came through. It was just a matter of finding one before someone else did, staking a claim, then being prepared to defend that territory if necessary.

It was in this second apartment, just blocks away from the first, where I lived while in Katowice. My Russian friend from Debica was not expected to arrive until year's end, if he showed up at all, so I would need to bide my time until then. My uncle came and went as the spirit moved him, spending far more time with his new lady friend than he spent with me. Which was perfectly fine as far as I was concerned.

My six months in Katowice were completely uneventful. I moped around a

great deal, keeping mostly to myself. The synagogue and Jewish community center was still standing at 13 Mlynska Street, but not once did I venture there to seek out and mingle with other Jewish refugees. What can I say? I guess I simply felt more comfortable being alone. I found it difficult to interact with others—even people who had known similar losses, faced the same years of terror and misery as I had. Countless thousands of people suffered together, yet their anguish, being such a personal thing, led some—like me—to endure it alone.

Uncle Isaac insisted on fixing me up with the young woman who lived with his lady friend, and I reluctantly agreed. She was not unattractive, but I found her overly chatty and far too effusive. After our second outing together, I mumbled some excuse and declined to see her again.

“Moishe, you’ve to get some release or you’re going to burst!” Uncle Isaac said to me, but I paid no attention. I simply was not ready.

Even my dream of Palestine had taken a back seat to the drudgery and emptiness of the here-and-now, and by the first snowfall of 1945, with no further word from my Russian friend, I had fallen into a state of depression. Often I would not leave my apartment for days at a time.

And it was not until ten days after the new year, on a blustery cold afternoon, that I heard a rapping on the door, followed by hoarsely whispered words of Russian in a voice I had almost forgotten.

“Moishe, Moishe Goldner, are you there? Open up, damn it! It’s cold as Stalin’s heart out here!”

The Russian danced around my apartment, flapping his arms back and forth across his chest, as if he was imitating the mating ritual of some strange bird. For the first time in weeks, I smiled.

“You’re a Russian. This weather should be nothing to you!”

"In Russia we dress appropriately for the weather. Which, incidentally, is something to keep in mind for tomorrow evening."

"Tomorrow?"

"That's when we leave for Berlin. I've got it all arranged. Not that the journey will be easy. Or necessarily uneventful."

So soon! My gloom lifted, a gray ash carried away on the wind. "I'd better tell my uncle," I said. "Maybe he'll come with us."

"I've already spoken to your uncle. That's how I found you here. He's welcome to come, there's already a large group going with me. But I got the feeling he wasn't ready to leave on such short notice." The Russian winked and grinned as he said, "He seems to be keeping warm enough, no?"

But I did not catch the man's intimation. My mind was already focused on leaving. "What will I need to bring?" I asked.

"Your pistol, for sure. A silencer, if you have it. We may need them both. Bring warm clothes and a heavy coat, of course. Your Russian military issue will be fine until we get to the American sector. If you have anything you can change into once we get across, bring it also."

"I don't, but I can steal something before we leave." I shook my head slowly, and added, almost sadly: "Who would have predicted the one thing I seem to have excelled at?"

"You learned from a master," said the Russian. I had told him a little about my time with Babik. "Back in Debica, my comrades been keeping an eye on him, by the way, because of his activities before the war. From what I've heard, he's been keeping a low profile."

I thought back to my last meeting with Babik's wife. *Your ties with my husband are over now. I don't want more trouble.*

"I guess he's been told to stay out of trouble," was all I said. I did not know

that as I spoke, Babik's weakened lungs were filling with fluid, and he would live for only a few more weeks.

"Well, for us the trouble lies ahead," said the Russian. "At this time there appear to be several ways to escape into Southern Germany's American zone, and from there, hopefully, to Palestine. Some refugees are being secretly transported directly across Czechoslovakia, by the *Bricha* Zionist organization. The exit papers, I understand, are being expertly forged right here in Katowice."

I was confused. "But we're going north, to Berlin, which is still in the Russian zone?"

"Yes, we think it's a better alternative."

We? Who is "we?" I wondered.

"Once we get into Berlin's small American sector—and that's where the danger will come in, although arrangements have been made—the Americans will get us safely to the American zone in the south of Germany."

The Russian said it confidently, but it had to have been only an assumption, something *he* had been told, for the politics were changing every day. Although Berlin's American sector had been established months earlier, it was only weeks before our border crossing—in January of 1946—that US authorities had reversed their position against Jewish infiltration and declared the sector a safe haven for displaced Jews. Of course, I knew none of this then.

I said, "Whatever happens, I'm with you. But I know we're going to make it across the border. I have no doubt of it."

The Russian smiled. He, too, had an instinct for confiding in the right people, making the right decisions.

"Is there anything that frightens you?" he asked of me. "*Really* frightens you?"

A moment's pause, then: "Yes—the thought that I might never understand

why God let almost all the Jews here perish like they did.” Then I looked away, my voice choking with emotion. “And why I wasn’t one of them.”

It was late afternoon on the following day when I said good-bye to Uncle Isaac and walked to the central station in Katowice. My uncle assured me he had no plans to remain in either Poland or Germany much longer, but would take his chances with one of the organized refugee programs rather than sneak across the border, as he put it, like a “common criminal, no offense.”

I knew nothing about who had planned the border crossing—*arrangements have been made*—or what the arrangements were. Was my Russian friend the leader, or was there someone else?

My experiences over the prior years had taught me not to ask too many questions. So I showed up at the appointed time, carrying only my silenced Luger and several rounds of ammunition inside heavy layers of clothes—which included, underneath my military jacket—a civilian jacket that had hung, until yesterday, on a hook inside someone’s open back door.

Shortly after I arrived at the crowded Katowice station, the group around the officer had swelled to at least 20 people: a few of them Russians, most of them Poles, all of us Jews. Our ages ranged from my twenty years—my twenty-first birthday was just weeks away—to a couple of men in their forties. There was a woman in the group, as well. A mean-looking lady, I thought, with a mouth like a sewer, from the little I had overheard. Well, I supposed, she had undoubtedly earned the right to be bitter just like the rest of us.

The train from Berlin finally arrived at the station, more than an hour late. At least they were running, now, with some regularity, if not punctuality. Katowice was the end of the line, the turn-around point for the overnight run back to Berlin. Already the cloudy winter sky had darkened, and I was anxious to

put this part of the world behind me.

“Will we be able to board soon?” I asked the Russian.

“Board?” He laughed heartily. “I guess I forgot to mention that we won’t be boarding this train.”

“What?...”

“We’ll be riding on top.”

This had never occurred to me before. *Well I’ve been under a train, why not above one for a change?*

“Now you know why the warm clothing is so important,” said the Russian. “It’s going to be a long, cold night.”

And it was. The full twelve hours it took us to get to Berlin.

Dozens of refugees were packed on the roof. Others stood on the running boards, some even clung precariously to the sides. In the carriages themselves, passengers were crammed cheek-to-jowl with no heat or lights—the result, I imagined, of Germany’s coal shortage. The train carried displaced Germans, mostly, whole families of them; but also surviving Jews like those in our rag-tag group, trying to escape from continued persecution.

Probably with indifference to us all, the train’s engineer pushed northward, past Brieg, Breslau, Cottbus, and Frankfurt, then due west into the eastern sector of Berlin.

My traveling companions huddled together for warmth, singing folk songs in Russian and Yiddish. They insisted I stay between them, in the middle, fearful that my small body might slide off the roof as the train picked up speed. I did not object; it was warmer there. Already, this was shaping up to be a terrible winter. I would learn later that it was considered the most severe winter ever in eastern Germany’s recorded history.

About 11 hours after it left Katowice, the train slowed to a crawl, plodding

between shadowy heaps of rubble. Eventually, we reached the bomb-pocked Stettin Station. End of the line. Pandemonium reigned as the rooftop refugees climbed down off the cars, blending into the crowded masses.

It was just past 6 a.m. The rising sun was scurrying the many thousands of rats which had taken over the city at night, feeding on refuse which choked the streets and canals.

With the dawn, I was shocked to see that nearly the entire city center lay in ruin. Throughout the rest of the city, damage was severe as well. Only one house in four, it seemed, remained habitable, and we learned that the best of those had been requisitioned by the occupying armies.

The Berlin which I entered that cold January day was truly a hell hole, already packed with millions of displaced persons. Thousands more, many of them Jews, must have been pouring in every day.

"We've got a long walk from here," said the Russian officer to our anxious little group. The walk, in fact, took nearly the entire day, for no public transportation was running in the paralyzed city.

I marveled at how my Russian friend seemed to know exactly where to lead our group. The man had never before set foot in Berlin, yet here he was, following a precise plan, directions apparently committed to memory.

There was little conversation as we walked, exhausted and hungry, each step bringing us closer to a point on Berlin's Soviet-American border that someone, somewhere, had selected. Each step of the way, we expectantly scanned the devastated terrain ahead, for this was the direction in which our future lay. There could be no turning back.

A total of eight checkpoints, as I understand it now, connected the Soviet sector of East Berlin to the three western sectors. The main east-west crossing, through

the Brandenburg Gate, passed into the British sector. To its north, two checkpoints opened the way to the French sector; and to the south, providing access to the American sector, there were five official points of entry. All were heavily guarded on the Russian side, with frequent patrols along the wire-strewn border between checkpoints.

During the afternoon, as our group trudged on, the Russian officer revealed that someone would meet us just before sundown at city's southern-most checkpoint. The sun was slowly setting, and the checkpoint was now a short walk away, across an area that looked like it once might have been a park. The border, we were told, was beyond a line of scraggly trees visible in the distance.

Apparently arrangements had been made to bribe the Russian border guards with cigarettes—the preferred form of exchange, far more valuable than *reichmarks*. In return, the Russians would turn a blind eye to our group as we walked past them. One cigarette for each person crossing would be a decent bribe. One pack of cigarettes for each one would be a windfall.

Who was to meet us? Where would the bribe come from? My questions were meaningless, because after waiting for nearly an hour, it became apparent to us that no one would shown up. The Russian leader looked impatiently at his wristwatch, then up at the fading light. Clouds were moving in, full and gray. Soon there might be snow.

“Something went wrong,” he said at last. “We can’t wait any longer. Help or no help, we’re going across the border now.”

As warmly as we had dressed, everyone in the group was beginning to shiver again, from the falling temperature, from simply standing around, waiting. We were as ready as we would ever be.

“If the bribe failed,” he continued. “we’ll have to rely on bullets. Moishe, you have a silencer on your pistol?”

I nodded, reached under layers of clothing to remove my Luger. It felt good in my hand again. Too good.

The Russian officer pulled out his own weapon, a Tokarev TT automatic, a Russian modification of the original Colt-Browning design. He snapped in a fresh magazine of eight cartridges.

“Moishe and I will take care of any soldiers who try to stop us,” said the leader. “From what I know about this young man, there’s no one among us better qualified, and I guarantee, no one with more balls.”

I glanced over at the foul-mouthed woman in the group, who returned my glare. I thought to himself, *including you, sister.*

With the defecting Russian officer and myself in the lead, our group made its way toward the trees up ahead. The road to freedom lay just beyond.

Peering through the trees, I looked out onto the empty road, seeing where it led to the Russian checkpoint about a block further down. It was there that a burned-out bus—a blackened, empty shell of twisted metal—blocked part of the road. A moveable wooden barricade stood beside it, stretching the rest of the way across. Beyond this point, I knew, the American sector began. And from what I could see, there was no corresponding checkpoint on the other side.

This border appeared to be manned by two Red Army soldiers. They were young, perhaps only a few years older than me, but that would make no difference.

The Russian leader and I each split off from the rest of the group. He headed to the left, I went right. Our simple plan had the main group walking down the road in plain view of the border guards. If the bribe had reached the guards, they would let the refugees pass. At least that was the idea. In such case, further action would not be necessary.

Meanwhile, both the officer and I would flank the group at a reasonable distance on either side, coming in at 90 degrees should the guards detain the approaching refugees.

Which is exactly what happened.

"Halt! Hands in the air!" cried the one of the guards, stepping in front of his sentry station and snapping to full alert as the scraggly group of eighteen men and one woman walked slowly toward the checkpoint. The group did as they were told; not to comply, we all knew, would invite a fusillade of bullets.

At that moment, I was creeping toward the checkpoint from behind a copse to the left. Suddenly I heard a voice behind me, speaking in Russian.

"You? What are you doing? Turn slowly, so I can see you."

There had been a third guard on patrol! I hoped my worn Russian military jacket would lead to a moment of indecision before the soldier took action. He saw me only from behind, could probably not see the Luger in my hand.

I, however, was well aware that a rifle was trained on me.

I stopped abruptly. As directed, I turned slowly, evenly. Then, in one smooth move, I spun the rest of the way around while dropping low to the ground. At the same time, I raised my pistol and fired.

The Russian did not have time to fire a shot in return. The bullet hit him in the chest, making only a dull popping sound as it exited from my silencer. The soldier crumbled.

I turned, and staying low to the ground, continued toward the checkpoint. The main group had their hands in the air.

"You can't cross here," I heard one guard shouting, trying to turn the group back. "Even if you have papers, this is a military crossing only. Go back now, or we will shoot."

The sentries' eyes were fixed on the group before them. They were not

prepared for the two of us who suddenly appeared on either side, our actions synchronized, as we each took aim on a Russian guard.

In seconds we dispatched both guards, leaving the Russian side of the border momentarily unsecured as twenty-one desperate Jews ran from Soviet-controlled Berlin into the American sector.

And as I ran, I cursed at what I had become, what I had been forced to do to two young Russian soldiers just doing their jobs, all because someone failed to show up with a few lousy goddamned cigarettes.

We walked for nearly two blocks, but saw no one. No American guards congratulating us at getting past the Red Army, no GI's running up to us, welcoming us with open arms.

You made it, we've been waiting for you! Here, eat all you can, and when you're done, there are private rooms and hot baths for each of you. Rest up, and as soon as you're ready, we'll get you on the next ship to Palestine. Outside cabin, I should think, after all you've been through. The American officer spoke in Yiddish, and his voice sounded just like that of my father. At least, that is the way the scene played in my imagination.

After a block or so, the Russian officer and I stripped off our military jackets and left them on the ground. Our uniforms would be liabilities from this point on. I had an ordinary jacket beneath it, the one I had stolen the previous day. The officer had a heavy flannel shirt, but no jacket. We would be warm soon enough, we were sure of it.

Because we had come across a checkpoint far from the city center, there was no more activity on this side of the border than there had been on the other. Surely if we kept walking ...

We all heard the sounds at the same moment. Gears shifting. The throaty

whine of an engine. Tires slipping on cold, damp pavement.

We waited expectantly as the sounds got louder, more immediate, and then, turning the corner and heading right toward us, there appeared an American jeep so full of mud and grime, it was impossible to tell what color it was underneath.

Brakes squealed as the two M.P.'s in the vehicle saw our small group of refugees standing on the road. They stopped and trained their rifles on us. We all put our hands up.

"Well, who have we here?" drawled one of the M.P.'s. At least, that is what I suspected he might have asked, for I understood very little English.

The Russian officer answered in broken English. I was astounded to realize the man spoke that language.

"Jews," he said, gesturing to the group. "Polish and Russian nationals. We come to ask refuge in the American sector, please, sir." He then turned to us and repeated his answer in Yiddish, so we could understand.

"Jews, huh? How'd you get past the Russian border patrol?" The American looked directly at the group's leader, then glanced at his automatic pistol which he had not hidden away within his clothing as I had done.

I looked away as the Russian smoothly told the M.P. about the bribe of cigarettes. He neglected to mention, of course that the bribe had failed and that we had to shoot our way past.

The American seemed satisfied with the response. Or perhaps he did not care *how* we got there. It was the British, we came to learn, who were intolerant of illegal border crossings, knowing the Jews were trying to get to Palestine.

While the M.P.'s partner got on his walkie-talkie and called for a transport, he asked the former Russian officer if anyone else in our group spoke or understood English. When the leader shook his head, the American asked him to

translate this message:

“Tell them ... tell them they’re safe. A transport will come shortly, and take you to an infiltree camp, to Schlactensee, probably, here in Berlin. Then we’ll see about getting you to a DP camp somewhere in the American zone.”

In Yiddish, the leader repeated the message to us. This was not the way I had imagined things, but it would be all right, I had to believe it would be all right. Then I saw the M.P. walk directly up to our leader while the American soldier’s partner watched intently, his rifle at the ready.

“I’ll need you to hand over your weapon, sir,” was what the soldier must have said.

The former officer of the Soviet Army hesitated an instant, then slowly pulled the automatic from his waistband. Gripping the thick barrel, he handed it to the American. Then, after a sideways glance over to me, he looked back into the face of the M.P. and said something in English that I could not understand.

“I told him he could have it,” he told us later. “I don’t want to ever use the damned thing again.”

Throughout it all, I kept silent about my own weapon, which I had concealed within the folds of my clothing. I could also have echoed the Russian’s sentiment, for I, too, never wanted to use my weapon again. But I would hold on to that Luger and my few remaining cartridges for as long as I could get away with it. Because, well, I figured it this way: you never could tell...

18. Displaced

My group spent less than 48 hours in Berlin before being packed into an UNRRA transport bound for the American zone.

Just recently, the Americans told us, UNRRA had become more involved in managing the DP camps. They were planning to take over administration of the camps from the US Army. As a result, acceptance and transfers had become easy to arrange.

The drive was a long one, nearly 24 hours to the southwest, much of it over roads and highways smoother than any I had ever seen in Poland. Our destination was Landsberg, just outside Munich. It was reputedly one of the largest DP camps in Germany.

For the first half of the journey, we were still in the Soviet Zone, but this route had been sanctioned for the Western powers, and we went unchallenged. Still, when we crossed into the American zone somewhere near Coburg, all of us aboard the transport let out a whoop of joy.

It was only when we arrived at the camp that we became aware of a new reality: the situation in the west was, in many respects, not any better than that in the east.

The Landsberg DP camp, specifically, was a horror.

It was grossly overcrowded, growing more so every day. It held more than 6,000 men, women and children. Mostly Jews, I think, the majority of whom came from concentration camps—particularly nearby Dachau. Landsberg had also been designated as a reception center for unauthorized groups of Jews—my group, for example—fleeing Poland.

Processing and registration took place in the main building, called the Roosevelt House. Registration consisted of a series of questions regarding personal background and information, administered in Yiddish by the few Jewish soldiers and officials there who could speak the language. Some apparently had themselves escaped from Europe just before the war, and returned as officers in the US Army.

"Name?" a soldier asked me, when I finally came to the front of a long line.

"Goldner. Moishe Goldner," I answered. "Moniek" had been my Polish name. I shed it now as easily as a snake sheds its skin.

"Nationality?"

"Jewish."

"Nationality?" the soldier asked again, louder this time, with obvious annoyance.

"Polish," I said, almost choking on the word.

And so it went.

I was assigned to a filthy barrack that had once housed a *Wehrmacht* artillery post. Others in my group, for some reason, were assigned elsewhere.

My block was three stories high and built of brick. Bunks were made of rough-hewn lumber, both double- and triple-decked. The mattresses were sacks filled with straw. I was given one shoddy gray blanket, which could have been either US Army or *Wehrmacht* issue. It was my only possession, other than my concealed weapon and the fresh clothes I had been given—the clothing donated, I suspected, by American Jews. I was allotted a narrow wooden wall locker in which to keep my things. I did not need it.

There was no place in the camp that offered any privacy. Not in the barracks nor in the washrooms or latrines, where more than half of all sinks and toilets were inoperative.

The streets of the camp were strewn with garbage, and above the iron fence which surrounded the compound, I could see the remains of barbed wire.

On the day of my arrival, I had plenty of time to take note of my new surroundings while standing in line for my first bowl of soup. I stood out in the cold for more than two hours, as the long line slowly inched forward. The lack of organization and planning was maddening.

I was not much of a conversationalist, for I had little to say to anyone. Eventually, however, I turned to the man standing behind me.

"I feel like I have gone from one hell-hole into another," I said in Yiddish. "I was lucky to never have been imprisoned in a concentration camp, but now that the war is over, here I am. The camps could not have been much different than this."

The man I spoke to was an emaciated Dachau survivor who went by the name Izzy. He had to be at least 50 years old, and his thin coat was pulled tightly around him in a futile attempt to ward off the chill. He considered my words for a moment.

"That's not true," he said dryly. "At Dachau, we didn't get a blanket."

I forced a weak smile, then said, "I just got here, but I'm planning to leave soon for Palestine."

The man snickered, "You and everyone else. I've been here a while, and let me tell you, young man, I don't know anyone who's made it to Palestine yet. The British who control the immigration there aren't much more partial to us than the Nazis were."

I mused how, for the past four years, I had lived in hiding, a wanted man. And now, here I was, *unwanted*, like all the other DP's.

Which is worse? I wondered. *Which is worse?*

As unpleasant as I found Landsberg, conditions there had actually been improving, from what others told me. Under the command of US Army Major Irving Heymont, a plan had been put in place to eventually transform Landsberg into a self-governing community.

Heymont was highly sensitive to the feelings many DP's held: that we were now merely prisoners of a different sort. So he abolished the system of being able

to leave the camp only for a day at a time. By the time I arrived, everyone was free to come and go as they wished. American guards had been withdrawn from the camp, except for one stationed at the main gate. His job was not to keep anyone in, but to keep out the starving masses of desperate Germans.

While the long lines for food continued day after day, at least I received basic nourishment. From time to time—usually in the mess line—I would run into the Russian Jew who helped get me to Landsberg, but over the ensuing months, our paths crossed less and less.

Much of my time was spent in the progressive educational system of the camp. Garages had been turned into classrooms and vocational schools, where various trades were taught. My schooling was primarily in Hebrew, for the goal was to ultimately prepare everyone for life in a Jewish homeland. But in spite of the shortcomings of my childhood education, which ended at age 13, I had a great ear for languages. I began picking up English, even Hungarian, which I heard spoken around the camp.

Shortly after my arrival, I was approached to join *Hanoah Hatzionim*, one of the many *kibbitzim* that had been formed in Landsberg and other Jewish DP camps. I still had little interest in being part of any survivors' group, but the single objective of communes like *Hanoah Hatzionim* was to facilitate emigration to Palestine. Realizing the importance of being a part of it, I joined.

Still, even among the Jews I came to know in my new commune, I remained close-mouthed about my wartime experiences. How could I talk about some of the things I had done, and the even worse acts I had witnessed? How could I explain my 20 month relationship with a notorious criminal, even to fellow survivors who had their own horrible tales? No, I felt it was no one's business but my own. I would keep details of my past to myself. It was enough that I should be forever haunted by it.

After about four months in the dirty, overcrowded Landsberg camp, I yearned to see what there was on the outside. So one morning in late May, after tucking my pistol into my clothes, I strolled toward the mess line but kept on going, straight through the front gates of the camp, toward the town of Landsberg itself.

Rationally, I knew I could leave any time I wished. Yet with every step I almost expected to be stopped and ordered at gunpoint to return. It was not until I found myself blocks away from the camp that I got my bearings and thought to myself, *now what?*

As I wandered through the city of Landsberg, I came to realize that the while camp I had left had been dirty and disorganized, offering barely any privacy, at least there had been a sense of belonging, a shared past, a common destiny.

And while I was free to go anywhere at all, I felt a renewed wariness, a vague sense of caution that had actually diminished when I had been in the camp. For in the German cities and villages, a tremendous amount of anti-Semitism still existed against the Jewish DP's—a fear that we might enter a trade or occupation on German soil, or reclaim property that was once ours. And the town of Landsberg, even with its heavy US military presence, was no exception. I had heard that just six months before I arrived, the town mayor complained in a memo to the Bavarian Government about the “Israelites” who were infiltrating into the community and threatening to convert it “into a ghetto.”

By mid-afternoon, I had reached the other side of town, and if I were to keep walking down the same road, I would eventually get to Munich. But I was tired and hungry and unsure of what to do next, so I stopped when I saw a large farmhouse ahead on my right.

I walked up to the door and knocked, with the intention of

requesting—demanding, more accurately—food and a place to sleep somewhere on the property.

The door opened and there stood the owner of the house, a German woman—seemingly well to do, by post-war standards—in her early fifties.

Speaking in German, I told her that I would require food and a place to rest. I held the Luger in my hand, not pointed threateningly at her but down at my side. It was enough to suggest I was not to be trifled with.

“Please don’t hurt us,” she pleaded, clearly terrified. “You can have what you want, and I promise you have nothing to fear from us.”

“Us” included her daughter, an attractive girl in her mid-twenties, and another woman of perhaps sixty whom she had taken in. Both of the older women had lost their husbands in the war, they told me. One had lost two sons, as well.

I felt no sympathy.

I came inside to a home that was clean and bright and cheery. The owner led me to her kitchen, which looked to have been freshly painted in white. Sunlight streamed through gauzy curtains which covered a small window.

I sat down at the table, putting my pistol down in front of me. Within minutes, she and the other two women appeared, carrying some bread and a generous slice of wurst. I ate greedily, watching as the women exchanged glances.

They excused themselves for a moment. I could hear them whispering in the next room. My fingers moved closer to the gun on the table.

The ladies came back into the room, but two stayed slightly behind as the mistress of the house took a seat across from me. Her eyes glanced nervously down at my right hand, which rested close to my gun.

There was great sadness in her voice as she said, “Look, I lost my husband and two sons in a war we should never have fought.”

I must have looked at her doubtfully, because for a moment she seemed flustered.

“Does that surprise you?” she asked, “that not all Germans were behind Hitler, or shared his hunger for war? We’re human beings too, you know. At least, we can be.”

I said nothing. People, I was starting to conclude, would never cease to astonish me. I could testify first hand at their capacity to do evil. Goodness, on the other hand, was a concept I found much more difficult to accept.

“You’re welcome to stay here tonight,” she continued. “But we were wondering—would you consider staying on a while longer and helping us? We’ll give you a room of your own, and fresh clothes, and food. Whatever you need.”

“How could I help *you*?” I asked.

There were chores that needed a strong back, they told me. Repairs. Working the field. Cutting down firewood.

Without thinking it over more than a few moments, I agreed. It might be a pleasant change, I figured, and Landsberg would still be there, if I decided to return. The three women seemed not to care what my ethnic background was, although they may well have guessed. They certainly did not pry.

After several days, I found myself becoming attracted to the daughter, Ilga. She was just a little taller than me, with a pretty face, light brown hair, and a shapely figure that I could not help but notice. Her breasts positively strained against the cotton blouses she usually wore.

Moishe, you have to get some release or you’re going to burst! My uncle’s words echoed in my head. I wondered if it was all my imagination, or was this girl the enticing little coquette she seemed to be?

I decided I would not stick around long enough to find out. As stimulated as I was by the sight of Ilga, the idea of sleeping with one of *them*—with a German

girl—was abhorrent to me. There would be someone else in time, I knew. But not now. Not here.

So after nearly a month, I announced that it was time to move on. The women were clearly disappointed.

“Good luck to you,” the older one called out to me as I walked through their door for the last time.

Ilga was silent. I wondered what she was thinking.

“Good luck to you as well,” I said in return, and—surprising myself—I realized I meant it.

And then I started back in the direction from which I had come, back toward Landsberg, to face my future, grim and uncertain as it seemed.

I had not walked more than a few blocks when I suddenly stopped on a whim, turned around, and began to head in the opposite direction, past the house I had just left, toward Munich.

It was early, and the light cloud cover hinted that the morning might not become unbearably hot. Not that it mattered—in a few hours I would be in the Bavarian capital, where I could catch a train to Salzburg. For I remembered hearing that the DP camps in Austria’s American zone were far more livable than those in Germany. I could not imagine ever returning to the filthy Landsberg camp, and wondered why it had taken me until now to realize it.

I was wearing striped pants, a lightweight jacket, and a handsome cotton shirt that felt cool against my skin—all expertly tailored to my frame by the women I had just left.

My weight had gone up to 121 pounds, the result of not having to stand in line for meager rations over the past month. Physically, I felt better than I had at any time since the war began; mentally, though, I still remained largely

indifferent to most others around me, feeling as if my suffering were somehow unrivaled.

In Munich, I found the station and waited patiently for a departing train. Several hours later, I sneaked on board an express bound for Salzburg, just across the Bavarian-Austrian border.

I had no trouble completing the journey, hiding the entire time from the train's conductors. Compared to my previous feats of subterfuge, this had been easy.

From what I had heard, there were three nicely-maintained DP camps in the Salzburg region. The largest would be Bindermichel. The grandest, according to many, was some distance away in Bad Gastein, where the refugees were housed in large resort hotels. But the camp I headed for was conveniently located just outside Salzburg. It was a place where several hundred Jewish survivors were being housed in what was formerly a complex of elite SS barracks. It went by the name New Palestine.

As I approached the camp on foot, my lungs filling with clean Alpine air, I saw it in the distance, shimmering in the morning sun. It looked just as I had imagined it would—a sleek, modern, settlement. I picked up my pace, and when I got closer, my heart beat even faster as I thrilled to one small detail that completed the picture:

There, framed against the dramatic backdrop of blue-white mountains, was a flag flying high over the complex of buildings. It was white, with a blue *mogen david* positioned boldly in its center. It was a *Jewish* flag, the flag of Palestine and the Zionist movement, a flag of promise and deliverance, here, here in what had been the belly of the beast, and it was without a doubt the most beautiful sight that I, in my 21 tumultuous, harrowing years, had ever seen.

At Camp New Palestine, the roads and barracks were clean, there were modern sinks and flush toilets that worked, and meals did not require a two-hour wait. For me, it was almost paradise.

I encountered no problems when I presented myself to the camp administrators. Here, UNRRA and another organization, AJDC, ran the camp, with the help of a small group of swarthy men who spoke perfect Hebrew but very little Yiddish. It was my first encounter with Jews from Palestine.

The *kibbutzim* in Camp New Palestine were highly organized. Some were liberally Reform, others devoutly Orthodox. I joined the branch of *Hanoah Hatzionim* here, and was immediately immersed in Hebrew studies that lasted the entire day, every day, except, of course, for the Sabbath.

Then, after about three weeks in my new surroundings, I was introduced to something that was, in reflection, probably long overdue.

Measles.

For in spite of having lived on the run for four years, and having slept outdoors in the worst kinds of weather, I had escaped illness just as neatly as I had escaped bullets and bayonets.

When the spots broke out, I was immediately transferred to the quarantine unit of a nearby hospital, where I discovered my malady was minor compared to the screaming patients I heard through the walls. Those men were suffering from syphilis.

Maybe Uncle Isaac was right, without female companionship I'll burst, I reminded myself. But it's a hell of a better alternative than what these men are going through.

When I returned to the camp a couple weeks later, I was selected by the Palestinians to augment my hours of Hebrew with a new curriculum: weapons and combat training. But it quickly became evident to them that I was already well-

versed in both survival and combat skills. Little by little, I even revealed a few of my past exploits.

My experiences as a saboteur and underground fighter in Poland elevated me, I have to admit, in the eyes of my fellow survivors. As prisoners of the concentration camps, they looked up to anyone who had the opportunity to strike out at the Germans.

My background and understanding of weapons and combat also piqued the interest of the Palestinians. They included me in a group selected for illegal migration to Palestine. And they asked me to join their own group, right there in Austria.

“We’re fighters too,” they told me. “We belong to the *Haganah*.”

The *Haganah*—a Jewish underground militia, formed in Palestine during the 1920’s to protect Jewish settlements against Arab attack—had been reactivated within Europe after the war to organize clandestine transport to Palestine. They used truck, rail, and specially-outfitted cargo vessels for the long and dangerous journey. All such immigration was highly illegal, of course, and was run by an institution known as *Mossad Le’Aliyah Beth*, whose members were recruited from within the *Haganah*.

“We can use a guy like you,” a man named Shmuel said to me. “You’re not only tough, but you seem to know a lot of the Eastern European languages. We have a mission, and you can help.”

“A mission?” I had hoped never to hear that word again.

“To find Jews who are still in hiding, or who haven’t been able to cross their border and to come to a camp like this one. You don’t need the training here, you’ve had more experience in combat than many of us. We’d like you to travel with us.”

I did not know what to say. “Travel where?”

“Hungary, primarily. Probably Slovakia, as well. You speak both languages?”

“A little. Enough.”

I knew I could manage in either language, at least well enough to be understood. But there was one important consideration which I could not overlook.

“What about Palestine? If I work with you here, when do I get to Palestine?”

Shmuel smiled. “I promise that within six months, you will personally join a group to the homeland. We’ll need you there. But right now, we need you here even more.”

That was good enough for me. I shrugged, and spoke the words that had come out of my mouth many times before:

“Why not? I have already lost everything. What more do I have to lose?”

It was mid-September when I began traveling with two, sometimes three, men from the *Haganah/Mossad*, in search of survivors who could be channeled into Palestine via the ever-changing secret routes. My first trip was to Budapest, with stops in numerous small towns along the way.

This time, I am happy to report, no killing was necessary to cross the borders. My small unit had ample money and plenty of cigarettes for bribes, most of it the result of donations from American Jews. And we had visas—which I assumed were legitimate—to aid our passage. I never realized until much later that the *Mossad* prided itself on the forgery of perfect passports and certificates from any country in the world.

We traveled on passenger trains, and this time I did not have to ride above or below the carriage, or hide within it. While my command of Hungarian was less than perfect, I could still speak and understand it better than my

companions. Together, we successfully located Jews—many who had been hidden by gentile families—who were eager to go to Palestine.

Throughout the autumn months and into winter, I made more than half a dozen such trips with the *Haganah*. Twice we found entire families who had hidden together and survived. I knew I should have rejoiced for them, but I could only think of how my own family had all been killed. That's when the familiar bitterness, like magma, came bubbling up to the surface.

The Jews we uncovered were turned over to other *Mossad* operatives, usually in Vienna, which had become the major center for Jewish exodus. There, they were given a physical exam and an UNRRA identity card.

But depth and extent of *Haganah* and *Mossad* operations went far beyond that. From Vienna, as I understood it, the refugees would often travel by truck, across the Brenner Pass, into Italy. There they would be transferred to one of several small ports for their trans-Mediterranean crossing. From that point on, it would be a matter of luck whether they got past the British and into Palestine. Some did; many more did not.

My small part in it all was just another job to me, frankly. The means to an end. The bitter winter of 1946-47 seemed even worse than the one before, and by the start of the new year, I counted the days until my six months would be up. Then I would make the trip myself, even with all its uncertainties. I was sure of it.

It was on March 6, 1947—just two days before I was finally scheduled to leave for Palestine—that I was picked up by the US military while on my way to Vienna in a crowded bus. I was taken by truck to military headquarters at Frankfurt.

There, I was interrogated—that can be the only word for it—by a large-boned Dutch woman (an UNRRA official?) who sat behind a massive desk and held a slim file with the name “Goldner” on the extended tab. She already knew my

birthplace and family background. I assumed she got that information from my registration at the Landsberg camp.

“Why do you want to go to Palestine?” she demanded.

Clearly, it was no coincidence that I had been picked up just as I was getting ready to undertake the illegal journey.

“Why do you want to go to Palestine?” she asked again, sharply this time, speaking German in an attempt to find a common language. “You just came out of one fire, and now you want to jump right into another one?”

Now I had reached the boiling point. I was tired from the long journey by road, annoyed at being intercepted, furious at the treatment I was receiving from this ... administrator, whoever the hell she was, who could not remotely understand the fire I came out of.

“Where the hell were you when they were killing us by the millions?” I demanded. “I’m not afraid of more fighting, fighting is all I know. At least in Palestine I could fight for a place to belong, not get away *from*. Who are you to tell *me* I can’t go there? Who made *you* the boss?”

The woman did not seem the least bit put off by my response. She pursed her lips together, looked down into her “Goldner” folder, then looked back towards me.

After a moment’s silence, she said, “You know you have family in the United States. An uncle. Aunts. Cousins.” A statement, I realized. Not a question.

I had been caught by surprise. “I think...” I stammered, “I believe my father had ... has ... a brother and two sisters, who left for America when I was very young. I don’t know them. And I don’t know about any cousins.”

“Well, your uncle in Chicago ... Louis Goldner, it says here ... he, for one, knows about you.”

"How can that be?" I did not have a glimmer of an idea where this place was that she called Chicago.

The woman pushed her nose back in the file. "He has a son ... your first cousin, that would be ... Irving Goldner. An officer in the US Army. Did a search for surviving family. Learned about you through records in Landsberg, then Salzburg. We've been trying to catch up with you for several months. Looks like you have cousins in New York, as well."

She waited several moments for this new information to sink in. Then she said, "You're a very lucky young man, Mr. Goldner. You have sponsors in the United States."

I had not thought much about America before, and I was despondent—after everything I had been through—at the thought of not being able to shape my own destiny.

"I suppose this means I'm not going to Palestine," I said glumly.

19. America

After a long and very difficult crossing, the SS Marine Flasher slipped past the Statue of Liberty and docked in New York. The date: March 14, 1947.

A number of my fellow passengers were quite ill from the turbulent voyage. Several had to be taken off the ship on stretchers.

I stood at the railing with other refugees as the ship glided into its berth. This was not the Palestine of my recent dreams, and I remained bitter at having my wishes ignored. Still and all, I had to admit, at least this place was far from the nightmares of my recent past.

I looked to shore, toward the land mass called America, with feelings of

both anticipation and trepidation. I had no idea of what to expect from this new country, or from my new family, strangers all. Nor could I fathom what new quirks of fate had even brought me to this point, so far away from the death and decay of Eastern Europe.

Once my papers had been processed, I discovered that the military had changed my Yiddish surname to Morris. *Fine. Call me Morris. What's another name?*

I was put up with other young refugees in a building in Brooklyn—an orphanage, perhaps. There I was given new clothes and three filling meals each day.

I eagerly began to explore the streets in my new country, overwhelmed as I was by the tall buildings, the lights, the heavy motor car traffic, the horns, the smells from sidewalk vendors, the store windows with strange and wonderful things for sale. Gone was the devastation and abject poverty of Germany and Eastern Europe; in their place, hope and opportunity, freedom and possibilities. I did not know quite what to make of it.

Just two weeks after I settled in Brooklyn, I was contacted by a cousin who lived in the Bronx.

"Can you come for *Shabbes* dinner?" he asked, speaking Yiddish. Nervously, I agreed.

On Friday, my cousin came to Brooklyn and escorted me to his home. It was my first time on a subway, and its loud screeches took me back, just for a moment, to the artillery barrage in the Blizna forest.

My cousin lived in a comfortable apartment with his wife, and they made me feel welcome. Although I knew a little English by then, we communicated in Yiddish. They didn't press me for many details of the war, for which I was grateful. They talked instead about family, about America, and filled the evening

with small talk. They asked me to return the following Friday.

Seven days later, I felt confident enough to make the trip to the Bronx on my own. With a great sense of accomplishment, I arrived at my cousin's house right on time. After dinner, they asked me to accompany them to Sabbath services.

It was the first time I had set foot in a synagogue in eight years. And this time—thanks to my extensive Hebrew schooling in Landsberg and Camp New Palestine—I actually understood the liturgy. But I chose not to join in.

After services, my cousin introduced me to the rabbi. The rabbi warmly clasped my hand. We exchanged a few pleasantries in Yiddish, then fell into a brief silence.

At length, I spoke up. "May I ask you something, Rabbi?"

"Of course. Anything."

"You talk about God. You pray to God. You worship God." The anger had been building up in me for years. "If there really *is* a God, where was He? Where was He when my grandparents were machine-gunned? Where was He when my mother and sister were taken away to die? Where was He when my father was killed at the hands of his so-called friend, when I had to live like a wild animal in the forests, when millions of innocent people were tortured and beaten and killed? How could He let it happen?"

It surely was not the first time the rabbi had been asked this question. Choking back tears of his own, he put his arm gently around my shoulders, and gave me the only answer he could, the only answer he knew to be the truth, and his heart must have ached as he said it, for it was no answer at all.

"I don't know," he replied in a small, trembling voice. "I ... don't ... know..."

For the next three months, I settled into a pleasant routine, visiting my cousin nearly every Friday evening and continuing to explore the strange and colorful streets of Brooklyn. The rest of the time, I took classes in English that were administered by one of the Jewish agencies.

I had read once in some silly book—not in school, surely—that evil spirits cannot travel over water. *If only that were true*, I wished. *If only my demons would leave me alone now that I have crossed the ocean*. But distance seemed to be immaterial, for the demons materialized at will, especially in my dreams. Well, if not distance, perhaps time would eventually keep them at bay, I hoped. But I could not yet imagine a peaceful sleep where they did not come.

Soon summer came, and at long last, I held a ticket in my hand for the passenger train to Chicago. I would be living with my relatives in that city—they had contacted me several times by mail—and there I was destined to begin my new life in earnest.

Within days I would arrive in that unfamiliar city, bringing with me all my worldly possessions—namely, the clothes on my back and a few changes, courtesy of UNRRA. I carried them easily in a single paper bag.

And along with my clothes, I brought just one other item. The one last thing that belonged to me, that had been by my side through hell and back.

It was, of course, the Luger. The captured Luger that someone had pried from a dead German soldier's hand during my first act of sabotage.

It was not that I planned to still use the weapon, understand, although the urge to do so would come over me more than once during my first few years here. I don't know, perhaps the gun had become a symbol to me, a symbol of what I had been forced to become, a metaphor given form and shape for all I had endured. It was an evil thing, I knew that, crafted by people who had succumbed to an insane doctrine of domination and annihilation. But like it or not, the

weapon had been a close and necessary part of me, and for some reason I could not throw it away any more than I could discard my past.

I cannot explain my motive any better than that.

And so, I boarded the train for Chicago, facing a future that seemed filled with both anxiety and promise. Life would not be easy, I realized, but this was America. Here I would be free to make something of myself, would I not? Here I could rise above what I had become while striking out at my adversaries, while struggling against overwhelming odds to make it through the war.

The war has made you tough as nails, Babik had told me.

So it had.

I was, after all, a survivor. But that was not enough, I realized then. Simply existing, one day at a time, was no longer excusable. If the memory of Mama and Papa and Gita and my beloved grandparents was to be preserved—if there was to be any meaning to the reality that I, over all these others, had been spared—then I could not just survive.

Now I must learn to live.

Epilogue: Chicago, 1949

This story has no ending. Not yet, anyway, for my life is still a work in progress.

I have adjusted fairly well, I suppose, since coming to Chicago. My aunts, uncles and cousins here have been kind and understanding, although I feel like I have been a burden to them. Uncle Louis begged me to continue with my education, and I agreed to go to night school to get my high school diploma. But during the day, I was determined to learn a trade, any trade, that would pay decent enough money to allow me the freedom to be self-sufficient.

One day I learned about an opening for a fabric cutter at a company that manufactured baseball jackets.

"I want to learn the trade. I want to be a cutter," I told the owner boldly, in my heavily-accented English. I did not know anything about the garment business, but I could learn. I even offered to work for nothing while they taught me the trade. That piqued the interest of the owner, a cherubic fellow named Harry Weinstein. He looked at me suspiciously.

"You'll work for nothing?" he asked. A wry grin spread across his face and he patted down the narrow thickset of hair that ran in a semi-circle behind his head from ear to ear. "Very well, then, but first you'll start by using this."

He handed me a broom.

Every day for the next week, there I was with my broom, with a mop and bucket, sweeping and scrubbing the factory floors. Enjoying the free labor, Weinstein paid no attention to the fact that he was not teaching me the garment trade as he had promised.

Finally, I could no longer hide my anger. I charged into the man's office, broom in hand, a five foot tempest.

"You know, Mr. Harry, I killed people like you for a hell of a lot less. If I had run into you back in Poland, I would have put a bullet in your head without thinking twice."

The man sat frozen to his chair, too startled, I think, to react.

I was not finished with him. "Here you are, a Jewish man, and do you ever ask me where I come from or what I have been through? Do you ever think to ask if I have car fare, or if I am hungry?"

Weinstein opened his mouth to speak, but I cut him off with a wave of my hand.

"I offered to work for *bubkes*, for nothing, but that was so I could learn a

trade, not just sweep your floors. You took advantage of me, mister. Here's your broom back"—I flung it in a wide arc, and it glanced off the corner of the man's desk—"so go sweep the goddamn floors yourself."

Weinstein stared in amazement at my *chutzpah* as I stormed out the door. But the very next day, I got a phone call. It was Weinstein, all right, asking me to return to the jacket factory, promising that he would begin at once to train me as a cutter.

This time, he was true to his word.

My first day, I was laying out fabric almost as if I was born to it. After a couple weeks, I was not only cutting, but getting the job done ten times faster than the old timers who made up most of Weinstein's work force.

Work, I have found, cleanses me, frees my mind from looking back. I do not need much sleep, which is just as well, because with sleep come the nightmares. They are real, these terrors, they are form and flesh, my immediate past. I find I can usually shake the hellish images during the day, but when they do surface, I reveal very little of them to anyone. After all, who would believe what I have seen, what I have been through? I can barely believe it myself.

Since I began as a cutter with Harry Weinstein, I have since moved on to other garment houses. I have earned a reputation, apparently, as a fast and industrious worker, for each succeeding house offers me more pay and the opportunity to size, even draft the patterns themselves. Now I work for two different companies in the same 18-hour day. It is my choice; I am driven to seek salvation through hard work.

These days I live frugally and save my money. Soon I will have enough, I think, to put a down payment on a six-unit apartment building. You really can do that in America, I have found. You can work hard and earn fair pay in return, and not have to answer to anybody.

I almost never wonder anymore what my life would have been like in Palestine. More fighting, that's for sure. But the fighting is behind me now. Another life.

As for my religious views, well, as Babik reminded me, I will always be a Jew, and I am proud of that heritage. But I do not go to synagogue very often; God and I are not yet on a very close personal basis. What I have seen: the killing, the destruction—I just don't understand how there can be a God. But if I am to be honest, I have to admit that I will try to believe again. For deep down, I must acknowledge that, in spite of everything that happened, someone must have watched over me.

When I do visit a synagogue these days, it is to attend an occasional B'nai B'rith Organization social function. Dancing, socializing—*kibitzing*—does not come easily to me. My cousin Irving usually cajoles me into going.

As a matter of fact, I went to one of those socials just a few weeks ago, and—as a promising note to end on—I think I am in love. I met a wonderful girl there named Eda, an attractive Russian émigré. She, too, came because someone had coaxed her.

I saw her standing off to one side, this girl of exactly my height, and was struck at once by her beauty. I walked over to her, asked her to dance. I noticed how she looked me over as I approached, which leads me to believe that her attraction to me was just as immediate.

We danced and danced, this free-spirited girl and I. Then we sat and talked a while, conversing easily in Yiddish. She told me that she came to America before the war, when she was eight. I think I muttered that I had been in this country only a couple years, that America was not my first choice, but somehow fate always seemed to know what was best for me.

“What do you do for a living?” she asked after a time, trying to draw me

out a little.

“I am a cutter,” I replied proudly. “In the garment trade.”

“Tell me something about yourself,” she said, with obvious interest. “You must be keeping a lot inside you, having been ... over there ... during the war.”

I was startled by her directness, yet at the same time, captivated by it. I looked into her gentle eyes and—surprising myself—I smiled warmly. It came from somewhere deep inside me: warm, genuine, unguarded.

“How much time do you have?” I asked.

Author's postscript

In September of 1997, I went to Poland. To Straszecin, where Morris grew up. To Debica, Grabiny, Tarnow, and the forests along the Wisloka.

I was drawn there by the power of Morris' remembrances, by the siren of his words. I went because I wanted to walk in his footsteps, meet anyone who might remember him and his family, see if anything from his time there still survived.

I went with no expectations, only hope that the trip would offer some worthwhile insights and prove interesting in some small measure to Morris when I returned with pictures and stories of my own. I had located (through an Internet contact) one of Jan Babik's surviving children, still living in Straszecin, and we exchanged mail; she'd be delighted to meet with me, she wrote in Polish, and would bring together two sisters and a brother, who also lived in the area. Beyond that, I had no idea what to expect.

Debica, I discovered, is a mid-sized, modern city—reasonably attractive, I suppose, but not remarkable. The synagogue Morris went to still stood on Krakowska Street, practically in the center of town. It housed a small department store. As I write this, however, I've learned that the store has been closed. The mayor of Debica has declared that the synagogue will be preserved as a museum, in memory of the Jews who once made up nearly half of the town's population.

Following Morris' route to his former home village of Straszecin took no more than a few minutes by car; Straszecin is today more a suburb of Debica than a separate village. There are still farms and fields in the community, though, and even today plowing is often done by horse and plow, because parts for tractors are hard to come by. But Straszecin no longer resembles the uncluttered farming village of Morris' day. It even boasts a small strip mall.

All around this area there are still many forests, although I suspect time and the progress of civilization has diminished their size and number. In many forested areas, memorials and markers have been erected over the site of mass graves, and often one can still see evidence of bunkers dug by the partisans and Jews who were in hiding.

Perhaps I stepped where Morris had once stepped, or slept, or fought; certainly I walked over grounds where countless thousands of men, women and children had died. Usually only a still silence offered any testimony, and it screamed louder than any voices ever could.

Back in Straszecin, the “palace” that once belonged to Stubenphol is still there, behind a fence on heavily wooded grounds. It looks more like an ordinary and quite unimpressive two-story house, actually, than anything remotely resembling a palatial estate. Today a factory occupies the grounds, and it’s said that Stubenphol’s two daughters, now quite elderly, sold off the property and moved to Krakow.

I saw the church grounds nearby where Morris often hid, and I could almost picture him raiding its fields so long ago. A modern elementary school has been built on the very spot where Morris and Gita went to their wooden schoolhouse, and a block away, a sturdy iron bridge has replaced the wooden one which crossed the stream that winds through the village.

On the corner by the bridge there’s a house painted a bold yellow; it had been remodeled and reduced in size, I was told, but it was the house where Moishe Rycz lived and ran his little store. It was also the house into which Jan Babik moved his family, after the liberation, and where he died.

Two of Babik’s daughters still live just a block away, in modern homes, and it was in one of those homes that I met the four surviving Babik children: Anna, Emilia, Stanislaw and Wieslaw, along with their children and grandchildren.

Their mother, Stefania, had died several years earlier, but she had passed down many stories about Moniek Goldner who was saved by their father when they were young.

The older of these siblings claimed to remember bringing food to the forest for their father and Moniek. They also talked of sitting on the bed when Jan and Moniek lay hidden underneath, and most frightening of all, being lined up outside their home, looking up at the barrels of semi-automatic weapons.

Their actual memories of these incidents and of their father were undoubtedly shaped in large measure by what their mother told them. They have no idea, I'm quite certain, of their father's life of crime, even though two old-timers I met recalled the man's pre-war exploits. They confided in me only after I promised them anonymity.

"In those days everyone knew Babik was a criminal, but nobody ever said anything against him because they were afraid," one area resident told me through my translator. "Even now, those who remember don't speak of it in front of the man's children. Why dig up the past?"

His children believe that after their father's escape from Auschwitz, he became a partisan with the Home Army. I didn't tell them about his criminal past, of course, or that he almost certainly became a mercenary for the opposing partisan group, and I hope they don't learn it here.

If, however, a translation of this book ever reaches them, I think they can still find a source of pride in their father. Jan Babik did save one Jewish boy's life and helped him to survive. And whatever his motives, he did strike out against the German oppressors, with great skill and bravery and courage.

Surely there has to be a measure of redemption in that.

In the village of Grabiny, just south of Straszecin, a small concrete block train station has replaced the old building against which Moniek and his father were shot. A Home Army veteran who lives nearby, a friendly old man with a thick middle and a warm smile, told me he remembered Piatek as a notorious Nazi informer whom the partisans repeatedly tried to kill, without success.

Is Piatek's house still standing? I asked, assuming Morris' grenades inflicted only partial damage. He wasn't sure. A few homes in the area remained unchanged since before the war, but he wasn't sure if Piatek's house was one of them. The man's been dead a long time, after all. Natural causes, as far as the veteran knew...

Back in Straszecin, about a block north of the bridge, a large wooden storage shed stood along the road to Wola Wielka, on the spot where the Goldner home had been. Sometime after the war, neighbors say, the home had been torn down and sold for firewood.

Across the quiet road I found the Lahowska home and farm looking exactly as it must have when Moniek lived across the street. Behind the main house there's a rickety old barn and an outhouse. Still no plumbing, even though modern homes have sprung up all around.

Maria Lahowska, a portly old woman with a craggy lined face and white hair covered by a patterned babushka, lived there still, and she talked impassively about Moniek, and about Rycz, who lived with his wife and daughters in the yellow house by the bridge.

She related how, several years after the war, one of the first television programs she ever saw showed a picture of three girls, wearing only thin T-shirts. The announcer said the Nazis did experiments on these girls, injecting them with the blood of rats, among other things, and the girls didn't speak and weren't even in their right minds, and the announcer asked did anyone recognize them?

They were the Rycz girls, she said, she knew it the moment she saw the picture, no doubt whatsoever. But she never came forward with the information, because to do so would have meant traveling to Warsaw, and that, she implied, would not have been convenient...

But not everyone had the same indifference, then or now, as Mrs. Lahowska. For back across the road again, just to the side and behind the storage shed that stands on the former Goldner property, is the home of Wladyslaw Regula, the neighbor who'd been a friend to Leap, whose daughter Anna had been Morris' first infatuation. Here was the very house in which young Moniek often played, in those sweet, innocent days before the German occupation.

The thatched roof had been replaced with corrugated metal, but in every other way the house looked as I imagine it must have in the 1930's and 40's. Inside, I found white plastered walls and sparse furnishings—a simple table and chairs, an old wooden wardrobe, a cot against the wall, and an ancient, wood-burning stove—which belied the fact that this was 1997. Electricity had been added for light, but in most every other way, the house seemed unchanged by time.

We were ushered inside by Anna Blezien—*the* Anna—who lives in a modern home just down the road. For many years, she told us, she begged her father to move in with her, or modernize his own home, but he would have none of it.

"Come in," she said to us, "my father isn't well, but he speaks of Moniek Goldner often and will be thrilled, as I am, to know he's alive and well."

And then I stood face-to-face with Regula himself, an expressive, animated, 90-year-old man. If he'd been ill, he didn't show it. The weather had been cool for early September, so he wore warm, shiny pants and a thin cotton sweater that covered a plaid shirt. On his feet, heavy work boots came up to mid-calf. His face and neck were as lined as a road map, his eyebrows still bushy and dark. Above a

high forehead, his considerable hair was only partially white even at his age, and it lay tousled every which way, looking like a small haystack.

When he spoke of the Goldners, of watching them being taken away that day in 1941, he spoke with emotion and with tears in his eyes, as if it had happened just days before.

He walked around his modest home as he talked, gesturing wildly and passionately, telling stories about tricking Moniek into plowing his field, about hearing of Leap's death, about giving food to Moniek when he was in hiding, and having to turn him away when new boarders made such aid unsafe for them all. He said he still had dreams about the Goldners, about Moniek, and he often wondered whatever became of the boy.

He cried to hear that Moniek was happy and well in America, and said he hoped Moniek would write to him.

It was with great reluctance that I left the man's home more than an hour later. And it was with even greater sadness that I learned, in a letter from Anna, that Wladyslaw Regula passed away just four months after my visit. At the time of his death, she wrote, he was still hoping for that letter...

Several days after I returned from Poland, Morris came to my house with Eda, his wife of nearly 50 years. I told them of my discoveries, of the many people I met, and spread out dozens of pictures I had taken.

Morris seemed surprised that anyone still remembered him. He smiled in recognition of his old synagogue. He grew excited at seeing several still-standing landmarks around his old neighborhood. And he got misty-eyed as all the painful memories came flooding back.

I told him then, as I had many times during our interviews, that I found it amazing he was able to rise above his inconceivable experiences. Yet he still

believes there's nothing special about himself, that he simply did what he had to do in Poland, did what he was driven to do in America. And that—while he insists if he had to relive his wartime experiences over again, he'd sooner die—he does believe that the blessing of his family and life in this country has been some sort of Divine repayment for his suffering.

But this grateful acceptance was slow in coming to Morris Goldner. When his first daughter was born, he said, it was some time before he allowed himself to hold her in his hands. Why? I asked. Because, he told me, those were hands that had killed people. War or not, he could not easily shake the guilt that had consumed him.

In time, he came to adore holding his children, and later, doting on his eight grandchildren.

He's 73 years old, this amazing Morris Goldner: a friendly, gentle man who has finally let go of the old bitterness, who has learned how to laugh but still can't stop the flood of tears that come, inevitably, when he opens up about his past.

And with the hundreds of hours of interviews that led to this book, some of Morris' nightmares have been stirred anew, but he can deal with them, too, for he's finally comfortable telling his story.

Morris is retired now, but his phone still rings with requests for his skills as a cutter. Every once in a great while he'll take a job, and you'll find him cutting or re-sizing patterns somewhere in Chicago, because this is what he does so well, what perhaps he was always destined to do.

But his real passion is his family, and now he finally has the time to devote to his wife, daughters, and eight grandchildren. He was a decent father, he supposes, but he's an even better grandfather. Because the years have softened him, helped him to control his anger, to be at peace with himself. Time has gently shaped his resignation that we cannot always understand why things happen, that

sometimes it's better to accept and move on.

Truth be told, Morris no longer feels the need to search for answers. When he sits in his daughters' homes, and plays with his grandchildren, and delights in their beaming faces, and sees his reflection in their luminous eyes, he knows why he was given the strength, so long ago, to endure.

And that's why, as he sat at my table, eager to hear stories of my adventures in the town where he grew up, he listened with interest and he listened with a full heart. But he listened from afar, safe in the country he's come to love and the city he calls home, having no desire to ever revisit the terrible, haunted forests that failed to claim him among the wretched millions.

--End--

About this novel:

In historical novels of this nature, it can often be hard to separate the fact from the fiction. Sometimes, that is exactly the way the author intends it. Not here.

In general terms, there are basically three broad fictions in this book.

One, much of the dialogue has been reconstructed—and in some instances, invented—to capture the essence of a scene that otherwise happened pretty much as written.

Two, some of the descriptive details that are essential to storytelling have been fabricated, based on research or intuition. After 60 years, certainly, no one can claim to remember such detail with total accuracy.

Three, the background chapters on Jan Babik—including his likely association with a specific People's Army unit—are based on both research and speculation. They present a realistic portrait of the man, as taken from Goldner's testimony and that of several people in Poland who knew him, but no one today can say for sure what was in Babik's heart and mind. Of his escape from Auschwitz, for example, we know he did, in fact, escape in a horse-drawn cart. But in the absence of further information, those scenes are based on written documentation of an actual escape that happened under similar circumstances.

Otherwise, what you have read—as incredible as it may seem—actually happened. Still, there will undoubtedly be a few skeptics. So be it.

All Goldner wishes is that you think no more of him, nor less of him, from what you have read. But above all else, he implores that you always cherish the fact that you live in a country where you're free to do whatever you want, where—God willing—you will never see what he has seen, fear as he has feared, or experience the depths of savagery to which human beings can descend.

